

A study of Australian Employers' Perceptions of Graduates from the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) at La Trobe University

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study in 2006 of Australian employers' perspectives of La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates. The aim of the study was three fold in relation to employers' perspectives. Initially, the intent was to establish the characteristics sought in potential employees for outdoor educator positions. Secondly to establish whether an outdoor education degree was beneficial in gaining employment. Thirdly and the focus of the paper, how do employers perceive La Trobe University Outdoor Education graduates in relation to the characteristics sought in an employee. Findings suggest that personal attributes and experience is the key characteristics sought when seeking employees. A degree is beneficial but must be included within a matrix of other skills. The study highlights that there are significant strengths to La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates, in terms of environmental knowledge and teaching skills, but concerns remain as to experience to theory ratio and development of judgment. The study indicates there are still issues with the articulation of skills learnt within a degree and the ambiguity of what experience is considered valid, which will provide an opportunity for further research.

Introduction

This paper reports the findings and conclusions of a study in 2006 of Australian employers' perspectives of La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates (Bendigo graduates). The goal of the study was to assist Bendigo graduates in their approach to gaining employment, academics in their construction and articulation of degrees, and employers in their quest for employees who match their needs of today and their desires for the future. To fulfill this goal I took a threefold approach in relation to employers' perspectives. Initially I set out to establish the characteristics sought in potential employees for outdoor educator positions. Secondly to establish whether an outdoor education degree was beneficial in gaining employment. Thirdly and the focus of the paper, how do employers perceive Bendigo graduates in relation to the characteristics sought in an employee. In the process of drawing conclusions to this research, I have found that through the process of gathering and analysing the data, I have established more than just employers' perceptions of Bendigo graduates, but also a general basis for employment of outdoor educators and leaders. Within this paper I will provide a synopsis of the literature that formed the basis for the study. Then a description of the methods utilised to conduct the study. Finally I will give a description of the results, conclusions, and recommendations of the study relevant to Bendigo graduates, the School of Outdoor Education and Environment at La Trobe University, and employers in the outdoor profession of Australia.

The study was in part a response to the issues established from speaking with other graduates, and employers, combined with a number of themes present within research conducted in America and the United Kingdom on employer satisfaction with outdoor education practitioners with university based education.

For twenty years, La Trobe University Bendigo has been producing graduates from their Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) undergraduate degree with the aim of *producing the best graduates of outdoor education in the country* (2006). There has, however, been little research into whether the graduates from this course are meeting the needs of the employment market. The degree focuses upon the blending of the theoretical basis of outdoor and environmental education with a strong element of practical training (La Trobe University, 2006). The degree is structured over three years with students progressing through a series of experiences linked with theory that involves a progression from being a participant onto leader and then an educator in the outdoors.

With the proliferation of similar university and Vocational Education and Training courses within the

Environment seek input from the broad employment market. Through this research it is hoped that this connection can be broadened and strengthened.

Previous Research

My first consideration was to determine how previous research into employers’ perceptions of outdoor education graduates might inform my study. I thought it appropriate when undertaking this research to first establish a framework to understand the context of the results. Within this framework I set about establishing the initial characteristics of what a good outdoor educator or outdoor leader are. From there I moved to what provides the educational ideology that underpins academic education. Leading on from this a review of what forms the basis of outdoor degrees and what is currently perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of these degrees. From here the framework shifted to what are the current perceptions of outdoor education graduates based upon the perceptions of employers from England, America and New Zealand. Following is a synopsis of the relevant research from these areas.

What qualities make a good Outdoor Educator and Outdoor Leader

Swiderski (1981), Buell (1981), Johanson (1984), Phipps (1986), and Priest (1986) all undertook studies to establish characteristics specific to what is required in outdoor leaders. For the purpose of this study Priest’s set of characteristics appears to synthesis the nature of characteristics currently accepted as a starting point as an entry-level outdoor educator/ leader. Priest (1986) identified 14 characteristics of a good outdoor leader within his thesis, *Outdoor Leadership Presentation in Five Nations*. In this study Priest focused upon five specific nations, Australia, New Zealand, England, America, and Canada. He established his results based upon the attitudes and approaches of outdoor leaders from each country that they applied to outdoor leadership preparation. Priest and Gass (2005) subsequently include a revised list of skills as a basis for a leadership text. The essential characteristics as described within Priest and Gass’s (2005) text on leadership are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of an Outdoor Educator/ Leader

Technical skills	Flexible leadership skill
Safety skills	Experience-based judgment
Environmental skills	Problem solving skills
Organisational skills	Decision-making
Instructional skills	Effective communication
Facilitation skills	Professional ethics.

These have since been broken into three defined categories *hard*, *soft*, and *meta* skills. They are utilised broadly to describe a person’s skills base and focus. Swiderski (1987) categorised specific areas within each of the skills set.

- *Hard* Skills – technical, safety, environmental, physiological, and administrative skills.

The nature of these skills relate to the methods, processes, procedures and techniques specific to programs and their activities.

- *Soft* Skills - social, psychological and communication.

These categories relate to the facilitation, organisational, and instructional skills that enable a person to run activities based upon the hard skills.

- *Meta* Skills - judgment and creativity.

These are the skills that hold together the two previous skill sets. They are the skills that deal with judgement, effective communication, flexible leadership style, professional ethics, problem solving, decision-making, and experience-based judgment. (Goldenberg, 2001; Priest & Gass, 1999; Swiderski, 1987)

Background to an Academic Ideology in the context of the Australian Outdoor Profession

It is from this basis of skills sought in outdoor educators that we then look at what ideologies exist to

vocational. It was not my intent to critique these ideologies, but merely form a basis of understanding by which to view the subsequent literature and research.

Research, scholarship, and the equipping of students for life drive the academic education ideology. Highlighting, that the progression of learning is equally as important as the outcome and is designed to produce critical thinkers that seek to challenge the status quo and seek innovation are the key themes of academic learning. Martin (1998) in discussing education ideologies and outdoor education drew on research that formed an ideology as a set of basic beliefs or worldview. He refers to them in the context of education as a "...framework for examining beliefs and practices in outdoor education." (1998, p. 15) An academic ideology is based upon the liberal progressive and socially critical ideologies (Martin, 1998), the aim of which is to provide a negotiated learning experience where the progression is equally as important as the outcome. An academic ideology is recognised as being responsive to society rather than industry (Mann, 2005a). This does not imply that academic pathways do not teach skills. Rather, the focus of an academic ideology is to enable students to make judgements and solve problems for the future as well as providing skills for today (Martin, 2005). The emphasis of an academic ideology, particularly in the field of outdoor education, is on judgement to underpin skills rather than the development of skills without the theory to equip the utilisation of them. Everard (1997) believes the linkage of this knowledge, theory and skills is possibly the material that bridges the gap between competence in the vocational sector and the academic.

Basis for an Outdoor Education Degree

Obviously there is an accepted view that the outdoor profession does require a system of education that is aligned with the academic ideology, otherwise we would not have the current outdoor education degrees that exist in Australia and around the world

There are three functions that academic outdoor education degrees potentially provide as described by research. Firstly, the development of a foundation of knowledge that is linked with practice (Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Barnes 2004; Plaut 2002; Maningas & Simpson, 2002; Mitchell & Poutiattine, 2001; Higgins & Morgan, 1999). The establishment of outdoor education degrees is to foster a greater knowledge of what the profession does and the ability to articulate this to practitioners and others. Those who teach in university degrees also aim to produce graduates who have grounding in the theory, history, and evolution of outdoor education to give strong basis for future practice. Plaut (2001) in research based in America, proposes that there is a need for university based graduates because of the belief that "We need practitioners who have the historical and theoretical foundation to be able to articulate what we do, why we do it, and how our work fills a need not met by more traditional schooling"(p. 138). Secondly, academic degrees serve to legitimise the field through the development of a body of knowledge specific to our profession and the ability to articulate our profession to others (Dingle, 2005; Martin, 2001a; Guthrie, 2001; Higgins & Morgan, 1999; Martin, 1998). It is the academic field that is responsible for research and scholarship. Therefore academic endeavours in the field of outdoor education would provide for this body of knowledge. To further legitimise our field degrees serve the purpose of providing a professional signpost for progression into the field. As a final point academic degrees aim to add value to a persons ability to practice in the field. Plaut (2001) feels that the combination of a foundation of theory, the legitimacy of a degree when viewed by other professions and the concept of learning undertaken within the academic ideology all adds value to a persons ability to be a professional practitioner.

Conversely, there is considerable debate in both Australia and internationally (Maningas & Simpson, 2003; Mann, 2006; Medina, 2001; Plaut, 2001) of the benefits that a degree gives to a person looking for work in the outdoor education field. Garvey and Gass's (1999) research, *Hiring preferences trends in the outdoor adventure programming field*, conducted within America, indicates that other characteristics such as personal experience, professional certifications, workshops and conference attendance are considered by employers to be as beneficial to potential employees as a university degree. To add to this research, Thomas and Nicita's (2003) findings in surveying Australian employers of environmental graduates, that while graduates were gaining employment, it was not indicative of their degree but of other attributes such as personal motivation, initiative,

Experiential Education International conference in 2001 indicated that attendees believed employment in the outdoor profession did not hinge upon the possession of a degree. Furthermore Everard's (1997) earlier research indicated that employers were implying that degrees were not sufficient to establish competence in the field, that other factors are required before gaining employment.

Perceptions of the Content of an Outdoor Education Degree

Research established that an outdoor education degree requires an inclusive blend of theory and practical time, with sufficient time to ensure the development of judgement to utilise the theory and skills (Barnes, 2004; Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Sugerman, 1998). In establishing these requirements for a degree, there are some recognised limitations to the current crop of degrees that exist within America, The United Kingdom and New Zealand and the existence of the tension in how degrees are divided between theory and practices appears to be a significant issue beyond others (Barnes, 2004; Deady, 2003; Humberstone & Mannerings, 2004; Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Priest & Gass, 1999; Sugerman, 1998). Deady (2003), in making a summation of the tension between theory and practice within degree curriculum, feels that an outdoor education degree has a need to fulfil the rigors of the academic field and also meet the rigors of the practical field within the profession. It is the need for this balance, which creates the tension between the level of experience versus theory taught and the opportunity to focus too heavily on one aspect or insufficiently on either by trying to achieve too much. Dumble (2005) does add though, that the length of time within the pedagogical process of learning and experience associated with outdoor activities has to be an extended period to allow for the development of judgment and decision making abilities.

Of the necessary elements taught within degrees medical training was seen as vitally important (Barnes, 2004; Guthrie, 2001; Zwaagstra, 2001; Sugerman, 1998). This was combined with high levels of practical experience a long with grounding in outdoor education theory and practice and elements of leadership, risk management and group facilitation (Sugerman, 1998).

One vital point to come from the research about degree content is that it ought only be seen as one particular perspective on the outdoor profession, (Little & Cosgriff, 2005). In Little and Cosgriff's (2005) analysis of the University of Waikato's Outdoor Education degree, they state that due to restrictions, limitations, and the reality of time, they cannot produce graduates capable of an immediate start as outdoor leaders. However, they can provide an essential grounding in skills and theory to mark their progression into the outdoor profession. Other limitations to degrees exist in terms of:

- Standards: considerable disparities between curricula and naming across all degrees (Sugerman, 1998),
- Articulation: The lack of coherent articulation as to the skills taught and comparable levels of competency versus other qualifications (Guthrie, 2001; Medina, 2001)
- Financial restrictions: there is an effect on group size, resources and trip destinations (Higgins & Morgan, 1999),
- Geographical location and philosophical orientation of the departments that they are housed within also impact on degree coherence (Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Sugerman, 1998).

Current Perceptions Held by Employers' of Outdoor Education and Leadership Graduates

In his research based on the educational, practical and employability philosophy of outdoor education degrees, Barnes (2004) surveyed 160 English employers, asking them what qualities they expect in an outdoor education or outdoor leadership degree graduate? The response was in his words "disturbing" to academics. The employers' ranking from 1-10 are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: The 10 most important characteristics required in an outdoor leader in the United Kingdom

Ranking	Skill Definition
1	Outdoor activity awards/ skills
2	Personal attributes
3	Experience

5	Communication skills
6	Knowledge and understanding
7	Problem solving skills
8	Project management skills
9	Information technology skills
10	Academic awards/ skills

The element of attitude is a major theme amongst employers, with Thomas and Nicita (2003), Barnes (2004), and Gassner (2002) all finding that a significant factor in employment is personal attributes – motivation, enthusiasm, ambition, maturity, and commitment. Gassner (2002) adds that attitude is arguably the biggest factor in a person’s effectiveness.

Maningas and Simpson (2003) revealed from a qualitative study of employers within the Association of Experiential Educators that all employers wanted some sort of medical certification, over half desired some sort of college degree linked with priority given to those with some sort of training. In addition, ultimately staffing managers prefer to hire someone with solid soft skills rather than specific hard skills. Garvey and Gass (1999) found that personal experience and medical training came before degrees. Yet, there is an instance of differentiation between England and America. In America, a potential employee without a degree was virtually disqualified from gaining employment. This was determined because employers felt a degree of some description identified certain skills that were not in evidence in non-degree holders; including the systems for learning and critique and the ability to adapt to dynamic work environments.

The literature indicates employers find a benefit to employing graduates based upon graduates having knowledge of standard practice and theoretical understanding of group practice, leadership and outdoor education, which subsequently allowed them to be more flexible in decision-making (Barnes, 2004; Guthrie, 2001; Garvey & Gass, 1999). Conversely, employers found that employees without university formed theoretical and practical grounding of outdoor education and outdoor leadership, often struggled to pick up these elements within a workplace environment (Gassner, 2002) On the negative side research established that employers found issues graduates based upon - high level of theory but lack practical and hands on knowledge and experience, arrogance amongst graduates based upon the possession of a degree, and a misplaced perception of their level of judgment relative to their abilities (Barnes, 2004; Harvey & Moon, 1996).

The literature describes a tension amongst employers that can be labelled as *Needs* versus *Wants*. Barnes (2004), Mann (2005), and Garvey and Gass (1999) found a disparity in employers’ perceptions of graduates amongst employers. The disparity amounts to a desire for certain skills based on their *needs* for today, skills necessary to run their programs, against skills and theory that employers envisage will be required for the future evolution and articulation of the profession or put simply what they *want* for the future. Raiola and Sugerman (1999) contribute this disparity of *needs* versus *wants* with a possible misconception of education compared to training. The application of education exists to teach the skills, knowledge and theory of when and where to put into action the skills with which you have been trained to do. This knowledge also extends to recognition of the implications of those actions. The need to improve the articulation of degrees is found within this issue, particularly a degrees’ content and the context within which it is taught.

Research Methodology

Data was collected through a qualitative questionnaire emailed to employers in the outdoor profession of Australia. The questionnaires central focus question was: What are Australian employers’ perceptions of La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree graduates? Consequently, research sub questions, which guided the research and were specific to the data collection were:

1. As an employer, what are the important skills/ attributes/ certifications/ qualifications a potential outdoor educator/ outdoor leader requires?

3. What are the perceptions of employers' in regards to university-based education, the subsequent graduates, and benefits of employment of these graduates?
4. How do employers' perceive L a Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates in areas of technical, environmental, teaching, and professional skills in comparison to other employees?
5. What do employers' perceive to be La Trobe University Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) graduates strengths and deficiencies in regards to skills, attributes, and qualifications?

Participants

In seeking participants I aimed to incorporate employers from the four main sectors of the outdoor profession: Outdoor Education, Outdoor Recreation, Adventure Therapy, and Organisational/ Management Corporate Development (Mann, 2005a).

Three strategies were used to solicit participants. The strategies consisted of gaining support from people who attended state conferences, advertising in state based outdoor education/ recreation journals, websites and newsletters and through contact being made upon information held on the La Trobe University School of Outdoor Education and & Environment data-base of practicum placement options. The first group of participants consisted of people who attended one of the two conference presentations I conducted. I attended the Victorian Outdoor Education Association State Conference in April of 2006 and the Outdoor Educators Association of Queensland State Conference conducted in July 2006. At these conferences I presented a paper *Australian Employers' Perceptions of Latrobe University Outdoor Education Graduates – An introduction to the study* (Munge 2006). This paper detailed the purpose of the study and outlines the information gathered within the literature review.

The second group of participants consisted of employers who responded to one of the advertisements that were submitted to each state-based outdoor education and recreation association for display. This occurred after initial contact was made with the head of the state based associations. The advertisement was displayed on either the association's website, through distribution in newsletters or E-newsletters to members or their quarterly association journal. The associations that included the advertisement in either format included, the Victorian Outdoor Education Association, the Tasmanian Outdoor Education Teachers Association, Outdoors WA, the Queensland Outdoor Recreation Federation, the Outdoor Educators Association Queensland, Recreation SA, the Victorian Recreation Association, and the Australian Camping Association.

The third group of participants resulted from invitations to contribute, sent directly to organisations or individuals, who have either sought for, or do currently employ past graduates of the School of Outdoor Education & Environment and whose details are held on the Schools database. This database has been constructed over time to include organisations throughout Australia who have previously hosted students in training as part of the course practicum or field experience components.

Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire are discussed in relation to relevant topics highlighted within the literature review. The uses of the employers own language within the interpretation of the results was a central theme to my research. As such I have given pseudonyms to the employers where I have cited their comments in relation to the data.

150 questionnaires were emailed to prospective employers, 32 valid questionnaires were returned from employers. Of the 32 employers involved in this research 24 had or were currently employing a Bendigo graduate.

The employers all held positions that can be described of at a level of senior responsibility within their organization. Table 3 depicts their employment position.

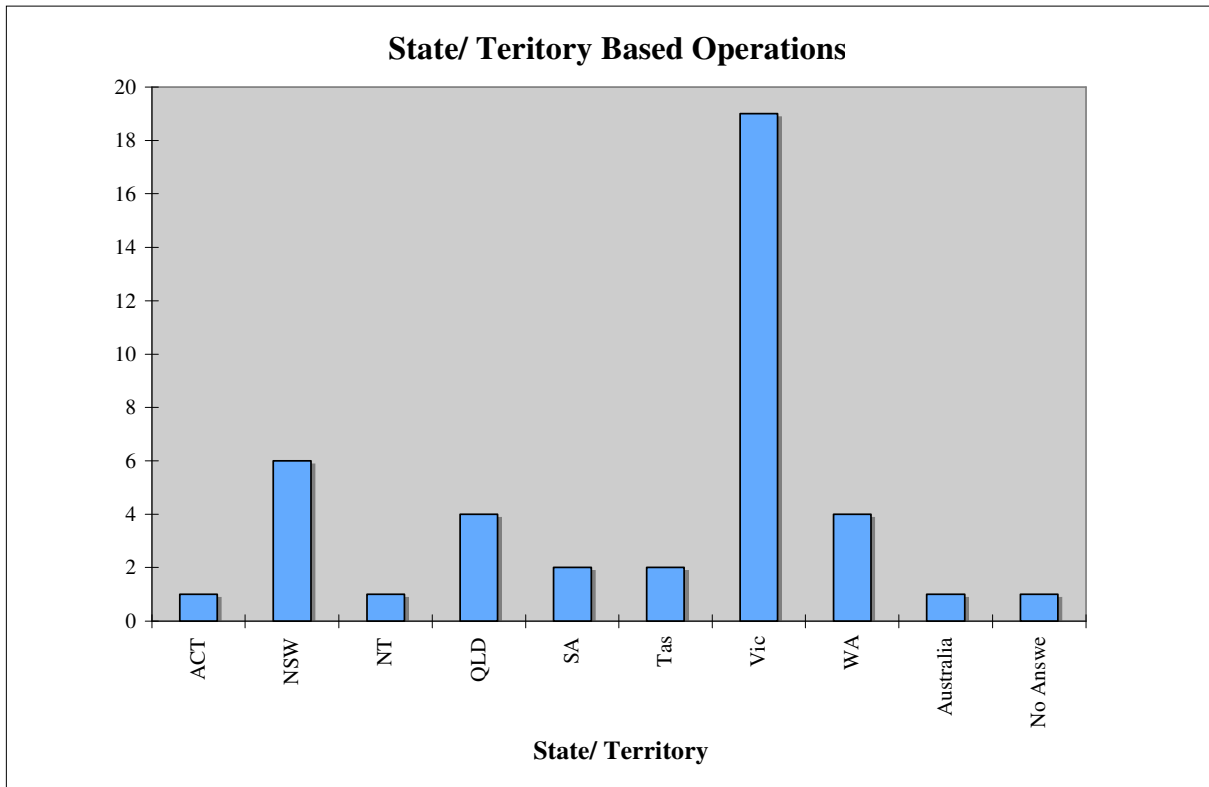
Table 3: Employment positions of research respondents

Occupation Categories	Number of employers who hold this position
Director	8
Head of OE/ Leading Teacher	6
Outdoor Education Coordinator	5
Principal/ Deputy Principal	4

Program/ Operations Manager	1
Unidentified	2

The organisations that these employers worked for were spread across Australia. It ought to be noted that a representative sample of Australia was not sought. Graph 1 depicts the state in which the employers' organisation predominately operated within.

Graph 1: Australian States in which the employer's organisation operates



The distribution of programs offered by employers' organisations is detailed in Table 4. School-based outdoor education programs were the predominant programs offered. Within this category all VCE outdoor education was included along with year level outdoor education trips and primary school trips.

Table 4: Programs offered by the employers' organisations

Program Offered	Number of employers' operating these programs
School based outdoor education programs	29
School based outdoor recreation	9
Youth at risk programs	7
Holiday programs	6
Other (Duke of Edinburgh, Tourism)	6
Registered training organisation/ TAFE/ University	4
Residential camp	4
Corporate training	4
Consultant	2

The employers reported a total of 850 people were employed within the 32 organisations represented. This employment ranged from 1 through to 275 employees. Employers indicated they employed 407 full time, 208 part time staff and 235 sessional staff. The data presents a broad picture of the Australian outdoor profession

the majority of the employers tending towards both a few full-time employees and also low numbers of part-time or sessional employees. The involvement of a number of large organisations inflated the employment totals for all three categories. There is great benefit in these figures for this research. It indicates that the employers involved have had the opportunity to witness and assess a broad range of outdoor educators. This gives rise to the opportunity for these employers to formulate concepts of what characteristics and traits are beneficial to their organisation when seeking new outdoor educators.

Employment of Bendigo Outdoor Education Graduates

Twenty-one employers indicated that they currently employ a total of 75 Bendigo graduates. They did not specify the basis for the employment. This is a response that is important to this research, as the average yearly graduate population is thirty-five, this figure represents proportionally two years of graduates and approximately 7.5% of the total graduate population over the past 20 years. La Trobe graduated their 1000th graduate in 2005. This must take into account that an individual may work for a number of organisations in a sessional capacity within a year. There is no way of quantifying how many staff work across organisations, as staff were not identified within this study. Twenty-four employers had employed a total of 326 Bendigo graduates in the past 10 years. This represents 32% of the graduate population of the past 20 years.

The Desired Characteristics of a Potential Employee

The employers detailed a variety of essential employee characteristics that form the basis for employment as outdoor educator. The responses included characteristics generic to the profession and specific to their own organisation. The top 10 desired characteristics as indicated by employers are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Employers desired characteristics in a potential outdoor educator or outdoor leader

Rank	Characteristic
1	Personal attributes
2	Previous experience and broad range of outdoor skills
3	Interpersonal and facilitation skills
4	First Aid (Wilderness first aid)
5	Skills/ Knowledge/ Qualifications in organisations relevant activities
6	Enthusiasm and passion for the profession
7	Instructional skills (bushwalking/ rock climbing and roping skills/ flat water paddling)
8	Professional attitude/ confidence/ competence/ judgment
9	Formal qualifications in outdoor education (degree/ diploma)
10	Team work

The four key areas highlighted by employers are detailed described in more detail.

Personal Attributes

In analysing the employers’ responses related to desired characteristics, a clear trend appeared. Characteristics specific to attitude, motivation, initiative, self confidence, and flexibility among others, were the most sought after by employers when reviewing possible employees for outdoor educator or outdoor leadership positions. This finding agrees with Thomas and Nicita (2003), Barnes (2004), and Gassner’s (2002) research, that someone’s attitude is a key contributor to their employment potential. Specifically that a person’s attitude is linked with their effectiveness. Employers comments related to this element included “We look at the ‘whole person’, their flexibility in different situations, and their ability to demonstrate initiative and to work as part of a team” (Martin).

Experience

employment. Experience in the outdoors and a broad range of skills were essentially very important, with the underlying point being that these experiences were preferably beyond qualification/ certification standards. Sam highlights the need for students to go beyond what is taught within courses, "It is also important what experience people have, have they lead-climbed much, how much of these things have they done outside their course?"

Qualifications

As for a key overall qualification, First Aid, and more specifically Wilderness First Aid, was indicated as a highly desirable qualification for potential employees to possess.

Employers indicated that a potential employee ought to have skills, knowledge and qualifications in the organisations relevant activities. This indicates employers' individual requirements and the need for potential employees to focus on specific organisations requirements and contextual issues that surround them. In looking at the qualifications relevant to the organisation, employers sought three key areas. Firstly, the need to have certifiable evidence of competency, Secondly, qualifications that match those required in the program, and thirdly, employers are looking for someone that have capabilities that go beyond that of the skills required for an activity.

On a scale of desired qualifications, formal qualifications in outdoor education, specifically a degree, ranked higher than that of a VET certificate and was seen as advantageous to the employment prospects. Employers indicated that the theory and underpinning philosophy behind the skills acquired was of benefit in a potential employee.

Specific Activity Skills

The key activity skills that underpin many employers organisations activities, bushwalking, rock climbing, canoeing and flat-water activities, were the most sought after by employers. On top of this a potential employees' proven ability to conduct and facilitate these activities was seen by employers as highly beneficial to their employment. The ability to incorporate these skills into a professional approach was noted as important but with recognition that many employees were starting out in the profession, and this attribute needed time to develop.

As a final point upon all employers desired characteristics, the need for passion and enthusiasm for the outdoors and the profession was regularly commented upon by the majority of employers.

What are employers' perceptions of university-educated outdoor educators?

Employers' perceptions were sought as to what characteristics a university-trained outdoor educator ought to possess. The employers' thought that graduates from outdoor education degrees ought to have a range of skills and attributes. They regarded four areas as necessary:

- Specialist knowledge

Employers indicated that graduates ought to have specialist knowledge of their chosen area, combined with the required qualifications, which allows them to practice in the field. A second aspect to this is that graduates ought to have developed the judgment to not overstate their own capabilities in light of the possession of a degree.

- Personal attributes

Attitude, enthusiasm and passion, flexibility, and interpersonal skills, among others, are all expected of graduates of outdoor education degrees. These skills need to be linked and blended with those of the technical skills.

- The ability to understand the theory and philosophy of outdoor education,

The personal attributes mentioned by employers need to be linked with an understanding of the theory and philosophy that underpins outdoor education. This knowledge allows graduates to structure programs that incorporate outdoor education theory. Further to this graduates ought to have the capacity to articulate the

- Professional considerations

Employers have an expectation that graduates from university outdoor education degrees ought to have a significant blend of judgment and professional capabilities, which go beyond that of merely operating an activity.

Employers' perceptions on the employment of outdoor education graduates

Employers were asked to provide their perceptions on whether there was a benefit to employing outdoor educators from university outdoor education degrees. Employers indicated 4 key areas of benefit when employing outdoor education graduates. These are listed with a comments made by employers:

- Understanding of philosophy of outdoor education,

“They [graduates] do on the whole make good group leaders (generalist staff) as they have a deeper understanding of the philosophy behind why we take students out. If they have a university degree and specific outdoor activity qualifications that will make them very sought after” (Catherine).

- Broader range of attributes,

“TAFE students are starting to be better thought of and can be good employees as assistant leaders or in the provision of activity specific programs. However, they generally do not have the background, experience or vision to lead groups, facilitate experiences, develop review and modify programs, liaise with clients in identifying goals and then drafting programs to suit i.e. TAFE students are better at ground level or the chalk face while university trained students are better outdoor educators” (Narelle).

- Passion for and commitment to the field

“I believe that university graduates are much more rounded in their passion and experience. As opposed to many, I feel that 3-4 years of an outdoor education course provides much more practical and varied experience, as opposed to a certificate 4, where it is crammed into one block” (Kelly).

- Ability to structure and facilitate experiences for the engagement of students.

“One of the benefits of having instructors university trained is that they may have a better understanding of the psychology behind education in the outdoors, and therefore structure activities to have maximum impact on/engagement of students.” (Rebecca)

Some employers found no additional benefit to employing outdoor education graduates, citing issues with curriculum structure, ideological influence of the institution and a degree of arrogance amongst degree graduates. The arrogance of graduates because of their degree once in the workplace provides a point that ought to be reconciled amongst graduates. This is particularly in light of the knowledge taught within a degree to be accepting of a variety of different systems of knowledge.

How do employers' perceive Bendigo outdoor education graduates?

In an attempt to gain a more descriptive understanding of the specific skills and knowledge of Bendigo graduates, I moved away from the standard expressions of *hard*, *soft*, and *meta* skills (Priest & Gass 2005) and proposed *technical*, *teaching*, *environmental*, and *professional* skills. A description of each is outlined:

Technical: Knowledge and skill in outdoor activities

Environmental: Knowledge and capacity to implement environmental studies and practices

Teaching: Knowledge and capacity to undertake facilitation, organisation, and instructional skills

Professional: Knowledge and capacity to incorporate judgement, ethics, risk management, and the integration of the Technical, Environmental, Teaching and Personal skills

I have chosen to utilise these themes for analysis as I feel they encompass the areas taught within an academic degree more readily, particularly the Bendigo degree with its strong focus upon environmental understanding and the concept of outdoor education rather than outdoor recreation activities.

Employers were asked to indicate how they rated Bendigo graduates skills in these four areas compared to that of other employees. The employers involved in this research who had employed Bendigo graduates rated their environmental skills 'Excellent', teaching skills 'Above average', technical skills 'Average to above average', and their professional skills 'Average'. These summations came from the employers' responses to the questionnaire.

Environmental Skills

As a key feature of the Bendigo program, environmental skills stood out as particularly strong amongst graduates. Eighty-two percent of employers who had employed Bendigo graduates rated their environmental skills as above average to excellent. Employers comments followed a similar trend, 'Superior as this is a focus of the La Trobe course and graduates tend to realise the importance of this element in a program' (Christine), "A real strength of the Bendigo Program!" (Megan), and "They are well qualified in environmental education and often passionate about it" (Sam). The ability to interpret, be proactive, and passionate about environmental education were the core themes behind most employers' responses.

Teaching Skills

Employers developed two themes in response to Bendigo graduates teaching skills. The higher percentage of employers stated that Bendigo graduates had 'excellent' teaching skills in comparison to others. The second highest response was that Bendigo graduates teaching skills were 'average' in comparison to others. The comments related to the 'excellent' response were based upon the theme of the ideological background of education, "Because Bendigo is a university rather than a TAFE course their skills are higher, but to compare them with say graduates from Monash or Ballarat, I could not see a difference" (Sam). Christine and Carlo follow similar lines, "Quite obvious they have been trained as teachers. Much greater development than non-graduates" (Carlo) and "the soft skills tend to be a lot better, graduates process the experience much better" (Christine).

The comments related to the 'average' response were based upon the themes of experience and individual fluctuations in skill. "Organisational skills vary widely between individuals most commonly, irrespective of their training institution. Facilitation seems more thoroughly taught at university but experience is the key" (Nick).

Technical Skills

Bendigo graduates technical skills were on the whole considered above average but employers did note four areas of concern within their technical skills:

- Fluctuation between individuals
- Depth of experience
- The need to formally assess
- Over confident in their skills

Professional Skills

Based on those responses, employers felt that Bendigo graduates were average in their ability to incorporate the skills in a professional manner. Two key areas were established by employers for graduates to be aware of, the need for experience so professional skills can develop, and issues related to judgment in comparison to ability.

What are the specific strengths and weaknesses in regards to skills, attributes, and qualifications of Bendigo graduates?

Employers involved in this research were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses in the Bendigo graduates who had or do currently work for them. These strengths and weaknesses focused upon the four

In light of the responses to the Bendigo graduates skill areas, eighty one percent of employers perceived that Bendigo graduates had a discernable strength. These strengths account for three of the skill areas: technical, environmental, and teaching skills.

Employers felt that the degree and its subsequent time frame allowed for the development of a foundation of skills. Employers also emphasised two areas within Bendigo graduates teaching capacity as strengths. Those two areas were educational and environmental ethos, and outdoor education theory and knowledge. In terms of environmental skills employers' were not specific as to particular facets of Bendigo graduates environmental knowledge, but more notably their general understanding and enthusiasm for the environmental aspects of their programs. Two other areas stood out amongst employers' comments of Bendigo graduates strengths: Passion for the profession and experience in dealing with groups.

Participant responses to Bendigo graduates weaknesses resulted in sixty percent stating that Bendigo graduates had a weakness of some description. The main areas that were identified as weakness within Bendigo graduates include:

- Graduates' unreal expectations of their position within the outdoor profession,
- A degree of arrogance in relation to their skills and ability
- Bendigo graduates lacked the accreditation of other training pathways
- A perceived lack of experience in the field.

In placing the strengths and weaknesses into perspective, one participant made the point of recognising the limitations to what a university degree can offer graduates,

“Bendigo offers what it does, it is not going to fill all the roles for a leader, instructor, or guide. If its students wish to get good jobs in the field then they need to, in their own time, extend their personal hard skills and qualifications” (Catherine).

This last comment resonates with the findings of Little and Cosgriff's (2005) research in New Zealand. Their findings indicated that a degree could not be expected to produce graduates for immediate start as outdoor leaders, but that it can provide the essential grounding in skills and theory to mark their progression into the profession.

To draw into perspective the perceptions of Australian employers in regards to overall potential employees and particularly Bendigo graduates, this section will discuss some of the key connections that can be made between the literature review and the findings.

The hiring preferences of Australian employers would concur in many instances with those studied in the United Kingdom and America (Barnes 2004, Maningas and Simpson 2002, Plaut 2002 and Garvey & Gass 1999). Technical capabilities, experience, medical training, and most importantly personal attributes were all factors important to employment. Degrees were still considered as important and a useful system of training for potential practitioners. Many employers would agree with the findings of Garvey and Gass (1999) that a benefit of employing outdoor education graduates was their deeper understanding of the methods, philosophy, and theory related to education. The benefits of a degree process allowed for a blend of experience and theory, which employers highlighted as a bonus in employment. This was of course tempered with a similar finding to that of Medina (2001) and Plaut (2001), in that hiring preferences show that academic degrees are desired and give a strong basis for employment but it must be in conjunction with other considerable factors. In Australia these factors include personal attributes and outdoor experience beyond that of a degree.

Negative elements of employing graduates were surprisingly similar between Barnes' (2004) study of employers in the United Kingdom and of Bendigo graduates. An area of major concern for Australian employers and those in the UK was that graduates had unrealistic expectations of their role and level of seniority within the profession. Other elements related to judgment and experience can also be linked with employers in both studies stating that graduates need to spend time as assistant group leaders to establish their practical knowledge beyond the theory.

fulfil day to day operations exist and are indicated in the initial characteristics desired in potential employees. Highlighting the aspects of *wants* by employers, analysis of the response to this research indicates a desire for the theoretical underpinnings of a degree and the ability to see the big picture of outdoor education. Linked with this is the main desire for people with personal attributes that are both difficult to quantify and assess in an interview process.

In Australia it appears that there also exists an incoherence in the articulation of skills held by graduates and the benefit of degrees. The instigation of the Professional Activity Statements by the VOA (Dingle 2006) (Appendix 1) will help diminish this, but it will remain for a period, while the employers and professional bodies develop a coherent language of articulation between the different competency levels of degrees and vocational certificates. The differentiation of training and education possibly adds to this misinterpretation of what a degree ought to provide as described by Raiola and Sugerman (1999). Raiola and Sugerman highlight that education is the understanding and judgment of when, how and where to put into practice skills learnt through training.

Of particular importance to Bendigo graduates are the elements of experience and particularly experience related to judgment. This appears to be an area connected to the poor articulation of the experience gained within a degree. Little and Cosgriff's (2005) comments that a degree course can only attribute to the development of a graduate to a certain level, ought to be held in reference to the development of judgment. This links with a key factor, which underlines many of the comments made by employers within Australia and links with both the academic ideology and research from America, that a degree is only one perspective on the profession. It cannot be the be all and end all for the outdoor profession. Graduates and employers ought to recognise that graduates require more personal development before moving up the ladder within the profession. Professional development was an element that employers made little or no comment upon other than to say that they may have to conduct it initially to bring people up to a certain standard.

Conclusions & Recommendations

In the process of drawing conclusions to this research, I have repeatedly gone back to the initial questions and sought clarity as to the intent and purpose of this study. I have found that through the process of gathering and analysing the data, I have established more than just employers' perceptions of Bendigo graduates, but also a general basis for employment of outdoor educators and leaders.

Characteristics of an Outdoor Educator or Leader

It is my conclusion that employers within this study seek potential employees that fit the requirements of their program but more specifically have the capacity to get along with people, be self motivated, outgoing and show initiative.

In terms of specific skills, employers involved in this study mirror those in other countries by expressing a desire for medical certification and as such, potential employees should look to have this as one of their competencies when seeking work. Other skills that form the basis of a vast majority of outdoor education programs in Australia; bushwalking, rock climbing, and flat water canoeing are also strong staples to have in one's repertoire when seeking employment.

It is important for potential employees in the outdoor profession to gain experience beyond that which courses, academic or vocational, offer. Based upon the findings in this study, broad experience in outdoor activities is an integral component of proving to potential employers a willingness to go beyond one's own comfort level and seek out new challenges.

Potential employees when seeking work ought to understand the organisation's operations and attempt to gain experience in those activities to improve their chances of employment. Alternatively, they ought to be willing to act as an assistant for a period to learn the necessary skills required to operate within those programs. This element cannot be overstated. The recognition of one's own abilities and skills and where that positions you within the outdoor profession is vitally important.

Finally, potential employees should not hinge all their hopes upon one certificate or qualification. The ability to be open to a variety of experiences and opportunities ought to be sought, so as to develop a sufficiently broad blend of knowledge and skills that employers have emphasised as important. Linked with this is the necessity to

employees this ought to be seen as an opportunity to see a different way of doing things and they ought not try to hold one style of outdoor education as a standard for all others.

Perceptions of University Graduates

It is a conclusion of this study, based upon the findings, that a university degree is beneficial to your ability to gain employment within the outdoor profession in Australia. It is important to recognise though that a degree appears to form a background competency and the factors of personal attributes and personal experience in a broad range of activities formulate the key criteria for employment.

Graduates of outdoor education degrees on a whole are viewed as a benefit to an organisation through their employment. Although, it ought to be recognised by employers that graduates of outdoor education degrees bring with them one system of knowledge and skills relevant to the outdoor profession. The skills graduates bring to the workplace are at a level commensurate with a professional entering the field for the first time albeit with 3 – 4 years of theoretical study to provide a background to these skills. In light of this, they cannot be seen as a complete package of skills and knowledge for the outdoor profession.

Perceptions of Bendigo Outdoor Education Graduates

Bendigo graduates have been employed across Australia in all areas of the outdoor profession, with overall satisfaction with graduates rated as high amongst employers. The conclusions and recommendations I draw in relation to graduates are based upon the findings of this research and subsequently are directed to past, current and future graduates and to the School of Outdoor Education and Environment. The conclusions and recommendations are based on five areas:

- **The maintenance of a high standard of education and training**

Overall, Bendigo graduates were viewed as skilled and knowledgeable employees in the field. In the current climate it is difficult to say, as the La Trobe publication asserts, that Bendigo graduates can still maintain the title of the best outdoor education graduates in Australia, as perceptions have not been sought of other graduates. What can be said though, is that graduates have strong skills in certain areas, particularly teaching and environmental skills and knowledge, in comparison to other employees.

It is important then that the School of Outdoor Education and Environment continues to develop these skills within their graduates, that they do not follow the course of other universities in the United Kingdom by chasing short-term benefits (Barnes 2004). Barnes reported in the United Kingdom that many courses were supplementing theoretical studies of outdoor education with practical studies more attuned to vocational activities. This was done to satisfy short term needs of employers rather than the long-term benefits of the profession. I feel, based upon the literature underscoring the benefits of theoretical knowledge in outdoor education and the employers' comments within this research, that the continual education of graduates in outdoor education theory is vitally important to the profession. The issue of not falling to the pressure of short-term needs of the profession but looking to the long term wants of the profession and the employers, is paramount to the continual growth of the profession. Many of the short-term requirements can and ought to be learnt on the job, under the instruction of employers or mentors.

The development of knowledge related to the outdoor profession in Australia and its organisations is important for Bendigo graduates to have a broader understanding of the organisations within the outdoor profession including schools, recreational camps, and small and large outdoor education program providers and how they operate in terms of organisational structures and management. I recommend the School of Outdoor Education and Environment include a subject focused upon professional development and operational procedures. The inclusion of a subject along these lines will allow graduates to develop the necessary understanding of the constraints and implications that organisations operate within, which often dictates the programs that they operate. This is not meant to be following the British trend of business-based subjects that deal with the day-to-day operations of an organisation and thus forgo the elements of theory that Barnes (2004) refers to. The concept of this professional development subject could be focused upon building connections with

which will essentially allow them to understand the issues of theory versus practice that occurs in some organisation when they first start in the profession.

- **Specific qualifications**

In drawing conclusions specific to qualifications, I feel that there are two key themes. Firstly, there is a need for graduates to go beyond what is taught within the course and seek other certification. This is not solely to appease employers seeking quantifiable competency certificates, but to recognise that there are other ways of doing activities beyond that which the La Trobe degree offers. By doing this, they can form a broader perspective of the roles and activities undertaken in outdoor programs throughout Australia.

Secondly, it is apparent that the articulation of what a Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree as a qualification enables a person to do is required and sort by employers. It is important for the outdoor profession to recognise that the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree is not solely designed to provide employment in the outdoor profession, but that many of the elements of this degree are extremely beneficial to the profession. The instigation of the Professional Activity Statements for undergraduate degrees by the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (Dingle 2006) should be adopted or alternatively the School of Outdoor Education and Environment construct a similar document. The document should articulate the sequencing of skill learnt in context of theory taught. I do acknowledge that some courses of study within the degree do offer a covering letter for students of those subjects outlining skills learnt, and relevant equivalencies to community based certificates. It is my belief that this is somewhat piecemeal and does not allow for all graduates to appropriately articulate their course of study. The possession of this document along with logbooks and other certificates would enable graduates to provide a clearer picture of the skills and knowledge they possess and the context of which these skills were learned. This format for articulation would hopefully satisfy many employers and provide clarity when seeking to employ new staff from the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree.

- **Building graduates recognition of their initial positions within the profession,**

Graduates have two key issues that mirror those found in degree graduates from America and the United Kingdom. Judgment and arrogance appear to be the key complaints of graduates by employers within this study. The development of judgment is emphasised during the course; yet, it is important that graduates understand that this judgment has been developed within a particular context and is not always transferable to other areas or programs. It is recommended that graduates seek a period in any new position or environment as an observer or assistant group leader, particularly when recently graduated. This leads to a discussion of the issue of arrogance highlighted by many employers. While it would be wrong to say that each and everyone of the graduates from Bendigo have this element within them, it is important I feel that graduates move into the profession with the knowledge that they are at the first stages of their development as an outdoor professional. The knowledge and skills learnt during the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree is an introduction to the profession, and ought not be seen as an end but a starting point to new knowledge. As such, a degree of humility in ones ability is recommended as a starting point when undertaking a new position with an organisation.

In highlighting these issues, it is equally important for employers to recognise that the possession of Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree has required considerable dedication and work to achieve, similar to that of any teaching, accountancy, pharmacy or nursing degree. As such, while accepting that a new graduate may not know important knowledge relevant to their program, they do bring with them a system of learning and enquiry that has benefits beyond that of the ability to run an activity.

- **The necessity for personal experience beyond that offered within the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree.**

Employers regularly emphasised the need for personal experience and a broad range of skills in the outdoors. Barnes (2004) noted that personal experience was seen to be diminishing amongst graduates as financial restriction increased during their period of study. While financial restrictions are a burden to most people who seek the pursuit of outdoor experiences, it is important for graduates that they seek to undertake experiences outside of the course and under their own initiative to emphasise their interest and desire to be in the outdoors. Those times when undertaking personal trips are often the time when judgment and decision making can often be developed, as the safety net of the institution is not there to provide assistance. The other key point

Summary

In summary it is important to recognise, that on completion of the Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) degree, a graduate is passing into a second phase of education and not reaching a final point in the profession. With this in mind, Bendigo graduates have been shown to have strengths, particularly their environmental and teaching skills and knowledge, but should take heed of the issues surrounding their judgment and elements of arrogance and act accordingly. Furthermore, graduates ought to be supported by the universities, who have a responsibility to ensure the skills and attributes that are developed by the course are transparent and able to be articulated to the wider profession.

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