

**Stakeholder perception of student employability: Does the duration, type and location  
of work experience matter?**

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## **Abstract**

Student employability is a key aspect of higher education, with multiple strategies utilised by Higher Education Institutions in an effort to support the employability of their graduates. Despite this little work has been done to examine, and compare, different types of work experience. To advise students appropriately it's important to understand the factors that might influence the perceived value of work experience. The current study investigated three aspects of work experience: type (internship or volunteer role), location (extra- or co-curricular) and duration (six months or two years), and compared stakeholder (student, academic, employer) perception of work experience. The study utilised an experimental vignette design, presenting 175 participants (62 students, 57 employers, 56 academics) with CV excerpts that varied according to the variables of interest. Quantitative and qualitative items were also presented to explore perceptions of work experience. The results indicate that extracurricular experience was viewed more favourably by all stakeholders. The type of experience was also an influence, with internships viewed more positively when the job role was a high level graduate role (research assistant). The duration of experience did not produce a main effect. There were no significant differences in stakeholder perception of work experience. The qualitative data indicated that the relevancy of both experience and degree topic was important for employability, along with interpersonal and professional skills. These findings may support educators in providing students with advice regarding their activities outside the classroom, with a particular emphasis on extracurricular and internship experience, tied to student career aspirations, recommended.

*Keywords: Employability, work experience, internship, stakeholder*

## **Introduction**

A key focus of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is graduate employability, defined as the skills and attributes a graduate needs to gain employment and succeed in the workplace (Yorke, 2006). Certainly, one of the primary reasons that students invest in higher education is to enhance employment prospects (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010). Employability is particularly important when considered in the context of increasing competition for graduate job roles, where an academic qualification alone is no longer considered sufficient to secure a position (Heyler & Lee, 2014; Yorke, 2006). In addition, research indicates a perceived skill gap, with employers reporting that graduates are not always sufficiently prepared, or lack the required skillset, for work (Yorke, 2004).

A vital, and under-researched, aspect of graduate employability is work experience (Silva et al., 2016). A recent report indicates that there are 12 key employability strategies undertaken by HEIs to enhance employability outside the classroom, of which four are based on work-related learning (extra-curricular activities, volunteering, part-time work and work experience; Kinash, Crane, Judd & Knight, 2016). However, there is a lack of research examining the potential impact of different kinds of work experience on perceived employability (Silva et al., 2016). Such research is vital if HEIs are to provide appropriate guidance on such activities in order to enhance employability outcomes for graduates. The aim of the current paper was to assess the impact of three aspects of work experience; duration, type and location, on the perception of employability across three stakeholder groups (students, academics and employers).

### **Employability strategies**

Internships can be paid or unpaid, but are usually hosted by an employing organisation and are considered a valuable employability strategy. Internships enable students to utilise their learning in an applied setting (Wilton, 2012), and can ease the

transition from academia to the workplace (Hergert, 2009). Research indicates that the inclusion of internships in a degree programme can reduce graduate unemployment rates, with the authors speculating that this is due to a competitive edge produced through perceived applicant productivity (Silva et al., 2016). The authors also report that multiple short-term internships may constitute a more successful approach than a single long-term internship, with the former enabling the student to gain a broader range of experience and associated competencies (Silva et al., 2016). However, it is not clear from this research whether the duration of a single internship could influence perceived value. The relative value of internships in comparison to alternative forms of work experience is also generally under-researched. One of the few studies to address this compared internships to paid work experience and found that paid work experience in the final year of study increased the likelihood of full-time employment after graduation, but completion of an unpaid work placement did not (Jackson & Collings, 2017). The authors suggest that this may be due to the relatively short duration of the work placements, with longer placements linked to higher employability in alternative research (Brooks & Youngson, 2016).

Encouraging student volunteer activities has been reported as having three main aims: volunteering encourages resilience, moral engagement and student employability (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010). Certainly Barton, Bates and O'Donovan (2017) suggest that HEIs can promote employability through volunteering activities. The researchers highlight that for psychology graduates, gaining voluntary experience can be particularly pertinent, with the majority of graduates reporting that their volunteering activities facilitated career growth and enhanced employment prospects. However, the bulk of the data supporting the importance of volunteering for employability is subjective, and primarily from the student perspective (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010), which does not account for any discrepancies in perception across different stakeholders. Further research is required to determine if

volunteering is an effective employability strategy, particularly in comparison to alternative forms of work experience, such as internships.

Thompson, Clark, Walker, and Whyatt (2013) differentiate between extracurricular and co-curricular activities, with co-curricular being more closely related to academic study, and extracurricular being activities not part of the formal degree classification, and thus more likely to be external to higher education. Research with alumni indicates that extracurricular activities are thought to enhance a range of skills, with some variation across the activities. For example, art and music based activities were linked to creative skills, whereas paid employment was linked to commercial skills (Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson & Walker, 2015). Alumni who later became recruiters confirmed that extracurricular activities formed part of the selection process during graduate recruitment, highlighting the importance of these activities within a CV (Clark et al., 2015). In addition, Lau, Hsu, Acosta, and Hsu (2014) examined business school graduates' participation in extra-curricular activities and linked this to employability skills. Students engaged in these activities were more likely to positively evaluate skills related to employment (communication, leadership, creativity and self-promotion skills).

Research in this area has predominantly focused on extracurricular activities, and so there is a lack of research examining potential links between on-campus co-curricular activities and employability. There is however a link between co-curricular activities and the development of graduate attributes. A recent study examined the mechanisms for development of graduate skills, the findings indicated that some skills were not developed via the degree curriculum, but rather through extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Kember, Hong, Yau & Ho, 2017). Examples of skills associated with co-curricular activities included teamwork and intercultural understanding (Kember et al., 2017). This is indicative

of co-curricular activities enhancing skills associated with employability, but does not clarify if experience of this type is viewed as valuable by employers.

### **Assessing employability**

Resumes are considered to be the main method used by recruiters and employers to screen applicants, and make an initial selection to interview (Cole, Rubin, Feild, & Giles, 2007). This pre-screening means that some applicants do not make it to the interview stage, constituting an initial rejection of that candidate. As such it is vital to further understand the elements within a resume that might influence this initial decision-making (Cole et al., 2007). Cole et al.'s (2007) research, based on recruiter assessment of actual resumes, indicated that employment is determined using an interplay of academic qualifications, work experience and extracurricular activities. However, although using actual resumes enhances realism, the findings of that study could have been influenced by uncontrolled variance in resume content. More recent research has utilised an experimental, factorial design based on fictitious resume content, in order to directly compare defined variables (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). This allows variance to be controlled in order to focus on the variables of interest, though realism is consequently reduced. The results of that study indicated that good academic performance, combined with participation in extracurricular activities, predicted a high level of perceived employability (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). The participants were employed individuals based in Portugal, and as such the study does not consider alternative viewpoints of other stakeholders.

Furthermore, academic qualities alongside experience within a CV have been reported to have contrasting effects. Nunley et al. (2014) found that for business-related job advertisements, there is no evidence that holding a business degree improves employment prospects, but internship experience increased the likelihood of invitation for interview. Sulastri, Handoko, and Janssens (2015) examined psychology graduates and their success at

finding psychology-based jobs via CV data. Academic grades were found to be more important in securing a psychology-based job (e.g. human-resource, therapist) compared to non-psychology-based (e.g. administration related work, bank work). All work experience, including relevant extracurricular activities, paid part-time or full-time work, or enrichment programmes, was important to success in both types of jobs (Salastrì et al., 2015). The research differentiates between extracurricular activities and work experience, but does not assess different types of work experience such as internships or volunteering. Further research is required to define the impact of different types of work experience.

### **Stakeholder perception of employability**

In order to ensure that HEIs produce highly employable graduates, it is important that any discrepancies between stakeholders in the perception of skills, and the value of work experience, are identified (Yorke, 2004). Any differences in the perceived value of student work experience could result in students engaging in activities they consider important, but that have little or no impact on their employability from the perspective of an employer. Despite this, very little research has been done to evaluate employer preferences in terms of work experience (Jackson & Collings, 2017), or to compare perceptions of work experience across stakeholders.

One recent study examined the perception of employability strategies across students, graduates, academics and employers (Kinash et al, 2016). The results highlighted some discrepancies across the groups, for example, where 87% of employers indicated that work experience, internships and placements were valued when selecting applicants, only 40% of academics indicated that their institutions provided such experience. Although not compared directly in the study, the results also suggest that employers do not view volunteering (only 50% rated this activity as valued) as worthwhile as work experience. In addition, 65% of employers indicated extracurricular experience was valued, but less than 50% of students and

graduates reported using these activities as a strategy to enhance their employability. The authors suggest that these discrepancies in perception highlight the need for HEIs and employers to work together to identify, and implement, a cohesive and effective employability strategy (Kinash et al, 2016).

### **Study aim and hypotheses**

The current study aims to build on previous research by continuing to explore, and specify, the perceived value of different types of work experience across three stakeholder groups: students, academics and employers. The study utilised a mixed measures questionnaire design. This combined exploratory qualitative questions, quantitative items and a section based on the experimental vignette technique. A vignette is usually defined as a short, realistic scenario that describes a situation, a person or an object and systematically combines defined variables (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). In the current paper the vignettes were written CV excerpts.

The experimental vignette element utilised a 3 (students, academics, employers) x 2 (6 months, 2 years duration of experience) x 2 (internships, volunteering) x 2 (co-curricular, extracurricular activities) design. Based on the research summarised above, the hypotheses were as follows:

- H<sup>1</sup>: Work experience of 2 years duration would be viewed more positively than work experience of 6 months duration.
- H<sup>2</sup>: Work experience that was extracurricular (off-campus and within an external organisation) would be perceived more positively than co-curricular experience (on-campus activity within a University based group or facility).
- H<sup>3</sup>: Internship based experience would be viewed more positively than volunteer positions.

- H<sup>4</sup>: It was expected that students would be more positive about candidate employability than employers and academics.

In addition to the experimental vignettes a series of nine items asked participants to consider the importance of academic performance and work experience for employability. This aspect was exploratory with the aim being to compare stakeholder perception of multiple elements relevant to student employability.

Finally, the aim of the open-ended questions was to further explore stakeholder perception of what constitutes employability, and why employability is important, including examination of opinions relevant to work experience. The analysis of the qualitative data included assessment of differences in perception across the three participant groups.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 175 participants (62 students, 57 employers, 56 academics) were recruited over a period of five months to take part in this study. Students ( $M^{\text{age}}$ : 22.9, SD: 4.6) and academics ( $M^{\text{age}}$ : 41, SD: 11.7) were recruited from primarily the Social Sciences in terms of discipline. Employers ( $M^{\text{age}}$ : 38.3, SD: 13.0) were recruited from a range of career roles, including HR, administration and Human Factors. The characteristics of each group are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic characteristics for each participant group presented with frequency (percentage).*

Characteristic	Element	Group		
		Student	Academic	Employer
Gender	Male	11	21	16
	Female	51	35	41
Year of study	Postgraduate	12		
	Level 4	22		
	Level 3	27		
Discipline	Psychology	35	23	
	Business & Economics	4	13	
	Geography	5	1	
	History	5	0	
	Other	13	20	
Career area	Human Factors & Safety			7
	HR & Administration Management			6
	General industry			15
	Therapy / Counselling			12
	Other			3
				14

## Questionnaire

**Section 1:** Each participant was asked to provide demographic information including age, gender and degree discipline or work area.

**Section 2:** This section was composed of three open-ended qualitative items: ‘How would you define employability?’. ‘In your opinion what makes someone employable?’. ‘Please discuss whether you think employability is important and why / why not’.

**Section 3:** Participants were presented with two job roles in turn, one which detailed an administrative role and one which described a research assistant role. In order to mitigate order effects participants were randomly allocated to one of two versions of the

questionnaire, version one presented the administrative job first, version two presented the research assistant role first.

Each job role was followed by the presentation of eight CV excerpts. The CV excerpts were designed according to the experimental vignette technique (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). First a standard introduction, which was identical across all eight CV excerpts was constructed, this described a Psychology-Management Joint Honours student, with a predicted 2:1 degree classification. The CV excerpts did not present a name, gender or age for the candidate in order to avoid those factors influencing employability ratings (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Eight CV excerpts were then created through variation of the manipulated variables: Duration, manipulated through reported participation in work related earning that spanned two years, or six months. Type, by describing an internship or a voluntary role. Location, through a defined extracurricular (within a company external to the University) or co-curricular role (within a University based organisation).

In order to enhance realism, actual companies and job roles were described in each CV excerpt. To mitigate the potential impact of the described company, or job role, on reported employability, the associated job description was varied across the two versions of the questionnaire. For example, in version one of the questionnaire, a CV excerpt described an internship, of two years duration, with Hunter Adams, a Scottish human resources and marketing consultancy. In version two of the questionnaire, that excerpt described a six-month voluntary role with Hunter Adams (see Table 2 for an illustration). This variation of the experience details was conducted across all of the CV excerpts. Finally, the order of presentation of the vignettes also varied across the two versions of the questionnaire, in order to reduce the likelihood of order effects on the data.

*Table 2. Example CV excerpts illustrating alteration of content across the two versions of the questionnaire.*

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**QUESTIONNAIRE VERSION 1**

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**Example 1: Work experience of 2 years duration, an internship, extracurricular**

**EDUCATION**

2014-2018 University of Aberdeen  
MA Honours Psychology & Business  
Management (2:1 predicted).

**WORK EXPERIENCE**

2015-2017 (2 years): Market Research  
Assistant (internship). Hunter Adams  
marketing agency.

**Example 2: Work experience of 6 months duration, voluntary, co-curricular**

**EDUCATION**

2014-2018 University of Aberdeen  
MA Honours Psychology & Business  
Management (2:1 predicted).

**VOLUNTARY WORK**

Oct 2016 – April 2017 (6 months),  
Volunteer Bookends administrator.  
Aberdeen University Students Association.

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**QUESTIONNAIRE VERSION 2**

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**Example 1: Work experience of 6 months duration, voluntary, extracurricular**

**EDUCATION**

2014-2018 University of Aberdeen  
MA Honours Psychology & Business  
Management (2:1 predicted).

**VOLUNTARY WORK**

Oct 2016 – April 2017 (6 months),  
Volunteer Market Research Assistant.  
Hunter Adams marketing agency.

**Example 2: Work experience of 2 years duration, internship, co-curricular**

**EDUCATION**

2014-2018 University of Aberdeen  
MA Honours Psychology & Business  
Management (2:1 predicted).

**WORK EXPERIENCE**

2015-2017 (2 years): Bookends  
administrator (internship). Aberdeen  
University Students Association.

Participants were asked to rate the employability (from very poor, to excellent) and likelihood of invite to interview (very unlikely to very likely) on a five-point likert scale for each of the eight candidates.

**Section 4:** Participants were asked to rate the importance of degree classification, degree subject, extracurricular, co-curricular and graduate attributes, apprenticeships, internships, part-time work and voluntary experience for CV-based student employability on a four-point likert scale (not at all important to very important).

### **Data Collection**

The questionnaire was web-based, constructed using SNAP 11 Professional (Tidestone Inc.). Participants completed an electronic consent sheet, and then the questionnaire, online, with data collection occurring via SNAP.

Participants were primarily contacted via direct email. Contact information was taken from company websites for employers, and from University websites for academics. Employers and academics were recruited from across Scotland. Student participants were contacted via their University email, and were recruited primarily from a single Scottish University. Based on the number of emails sent, the average response rate across the three groups was approximately 15%.

### **Data Analysis**

The items assessing employability and likelihood of interview were averaged for each CV excerpt, producing an overall employability score. The scores were then entered into a four-way mixed ANOVA analysis in order to assess stakeholder perception of student employability for the two job roles (research and administrative assistant). The reported importance and value of work experience, academic performance and graduate attributes, were analysed using Kruskal-Wallis analysis to determine if there were any group based differences in perception of those elements.

The data derived from responses to each of the three qualitative questions regarding perception of employability was analysed using inductive thematic analysis by the third author. As such, themes derived from the data were data-driven (Braun & Clark, 2006). The data was coded in three main phases: Initial codes categorising the data at a semantic level were developed. The codes were assessed in order to determine themes within the data, allowing categorisation of the initial codes. The initial themes were reviewed and refined in order to ensure each theme was valid and represented a coherent pattern of data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The first author then cross-coded 20% of the responses across two of the open-ended questions in order to allow a test of inter-rater reliability.

## Results

### Quantitative analysis

All analyses were conducted in R (R Core Team, 2017) and RStudio (RStudio Team, 2016) using the tidyverse (Wickham, 2017), psych (Revelle, 2017), lsr (Navarro, 2015), afex (Singmann, Boler, Westfall, & Aust, 2017), and FSA (Ogle, 2018) packages and all data and code is available at [https://osf.io/y8fp9/?view\\_only=b3c5cd834f6647a0bd525850347cfcc5](https://osf.io/y8fp9/?view_only=b3c5cd834f6647a0bd525850347cfcc5).

All multiple comparisons are Bonferroni-Holm corrected and in-line with Cramer et al.

(2016) this is extended to main effects and interactions as well as pairwise comparisons.

Responses from the ratings given to the employability and invite to interview questions were combined into a single average score for each candidate rated by each participant ( $r = .79$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ). For clarity, the analyses for the research role and the admin role are presented separately.

#### *Research role*

A four-way mixed ANOVA with group (student, employer, academic) as between-subjects factor and location (co-curricular, extra-curricular), type (internship, voluntary) and duration (six months, two years) as within-subjects' factors was conducted using the *afex* package. (Table 3 for descriptive statistics).

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics broken down by each factor.*

Group	Location	Type	Six months	Two years
Student	Co-curricular	Internship	3.70 (0.85)	3.27 (0.87)
		Voluntary	3.30 (0.89)	2.88 (0.78)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	3.79 (0.86)	4.21 (0.69)
		Voluntary	3.15 (0.88)	3.60 (0.75)
Employer	Co-curricular	Internship	3.46 (0.84)	3.07 (0.83)
		Voluntary	3.15 (0.73)	2.78 (0.74)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	3.50 (0.92)	3.84 (0.87)
		Voluntary	3.33 (0.79)	3.56 (0.80)
Academic	Co-curricular	Internship	3.25 (0.89)	2.84 (0.85)
		Voluntary	3.21 (0.65)	2.89 (0.85)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	3.45 (0.99)	3.55 (0.99)
		Voluntary	3.08 (0.93)	3.52 (0.95)

A significant main effect of location was found ( $F(2,160) = 98.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ ), with extra-curricular experience ( $M = 3.55, SD = 0.91$ ) being rated significantly more positively than co-curricular experience ( $M = 3.15, SD = 0.85$ ), see Figure 1.

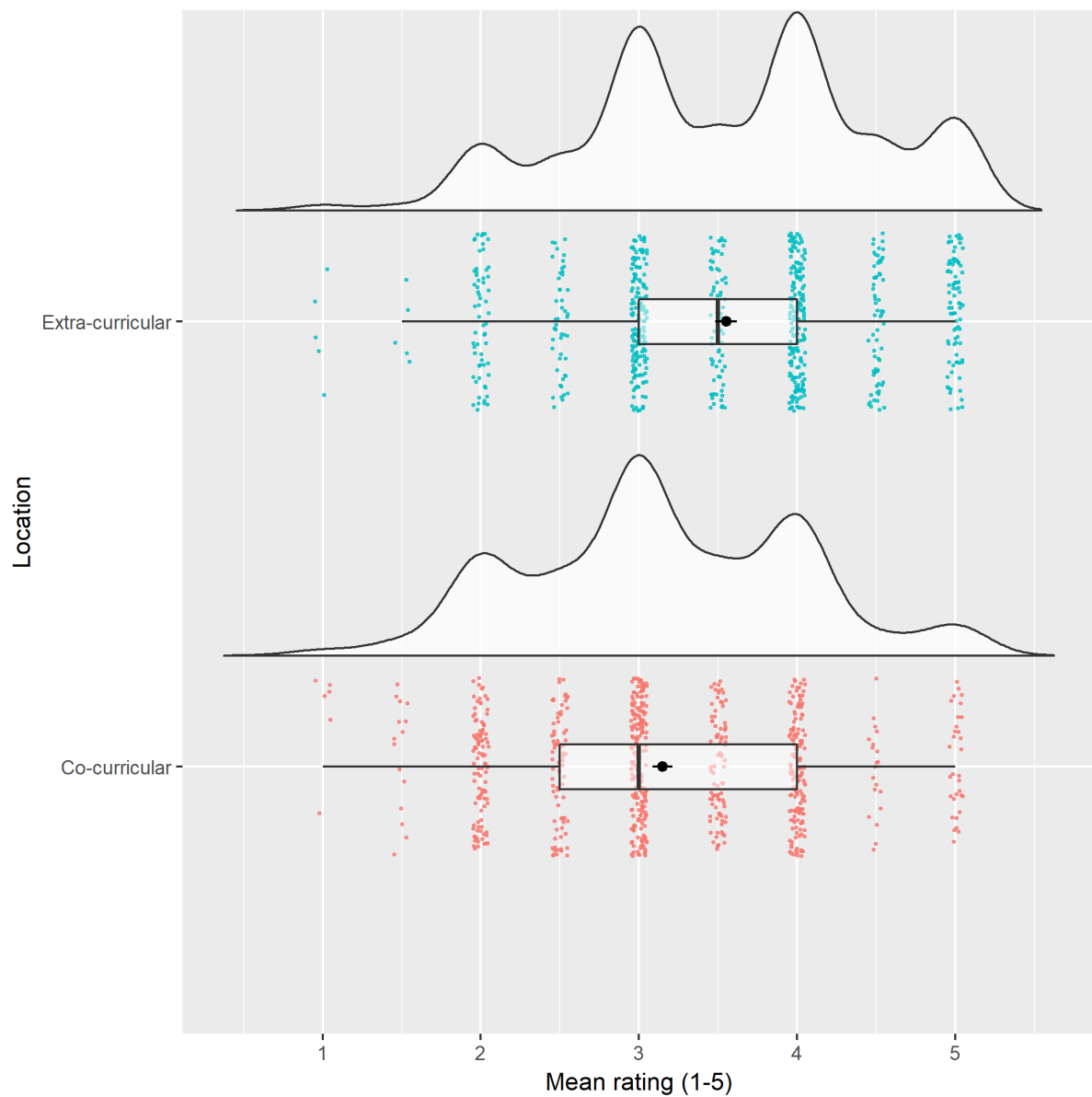


Figure 1. *Raincloud plot showing raw data, density, boxplots and mean with 95% CI for location.*

A significant main effect of type was found ( $F(2,160) = 18.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ ), with internships ( $M = 3.50, SD = 0.94$ ) being rated significantly more positively than voluntary work experience ( $M = 3.20, SD = 0.85$ ), see Figure 2.

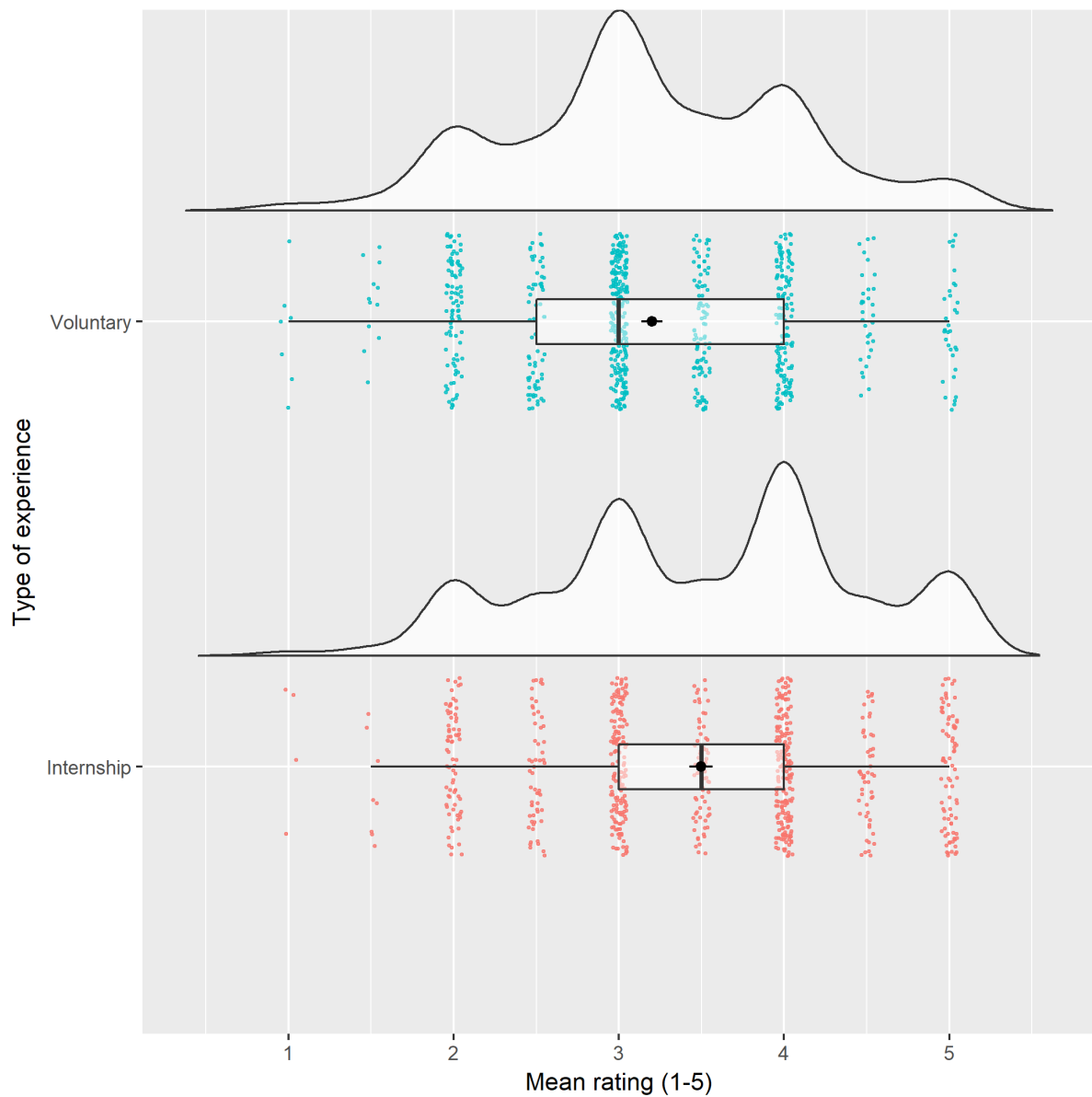


Figure 2. Raincloud plot showing raw data, density, boxplots and mean with 95% CI for type for the research position.

There was a significant two-way interaction between duration and location ( $F(1,160) = 112.6519, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ , Figure 3). Pairwise comparisons revealed that for two years' duration there was no difference in the ratings given to co-curricular or extra-curricular experience ( $p = .30$ ), however, when the duration of the experience was six months, ratings were significantly more positive for extra-curricular experience ( $p < .001$ ). Additionally, whilst two years' experience was rated as significantly better for co-curricular experience ( $p < .001$ ), for extra-curricular experience the inverse was found, with six months experience

better than two years ( $p < .001$ ). Of the four combinations, six months extra-curricular experience was rated the most positively, and six months co-curricular was rated the most negatively. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

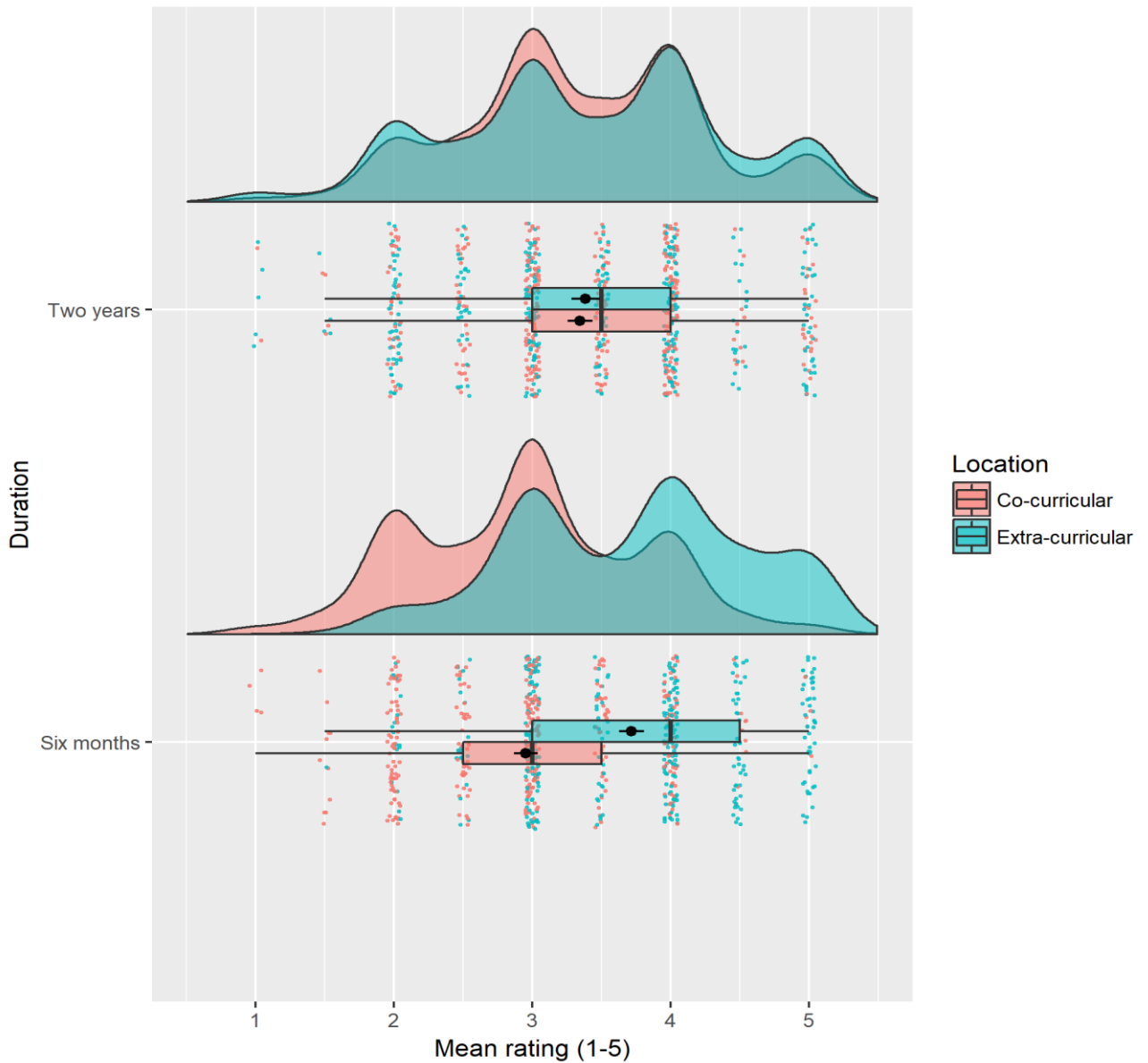


Figure 3. Raincloud plot showing raw data, density, boxplots and mean with 95% CI for the location/duration interaction for the research position.

#### Admin role

A four-way mixed ANOVA with group (student, employer, academic) as between-subjects factor and location (co-curricular, extra-curricular), type (internship, voluntary) and

duration (six months, two years) as within-subjects' factors was conducted using the *afex* package.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics broken down by each factor for the admin role ratings.*

Group	Location	Type	Six months	Two years
Student	Co-curricular	Internship	3.27 (.87)	3.70 (.85)
		Voluntary	2.88 (.78)	3.30 (.89)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	4.21 (.69)	3.79 (.86)
		Voluntary	3.60 (.75)	3.15 (.88)
Employer	Co-curricular	Internship	3.07 (.83)	3.46 (.85)
		Voluntary	2.78 (.74)	3.15 (.85)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	3.84 (.87)	3.50 (.99)
		Voluntary	3.56 (.80)	3.33 (.95)
Academic	Co-curricular	Internship	2.84 (.84)	3.25 (.89)
		Voluntary	2.89 (.73)	3.21 (.65)
	Extra-curricular	Internship	3.55 (.92)	3.45 (.99)
		Voluntary	3.52 (.79)	3.08 (.93)

A significant main effect of location was found ( $F(1,159) = 40.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ ), with extra-curricular experience ( $M = 3.61, SD = 0.84$ ) being rated significantly more positively than co-curricular experience ( $M = 3.33, SD = 0.86$ ), see Figure 4. No other main effects or interactions were significant (all  $ps > .3$ ).

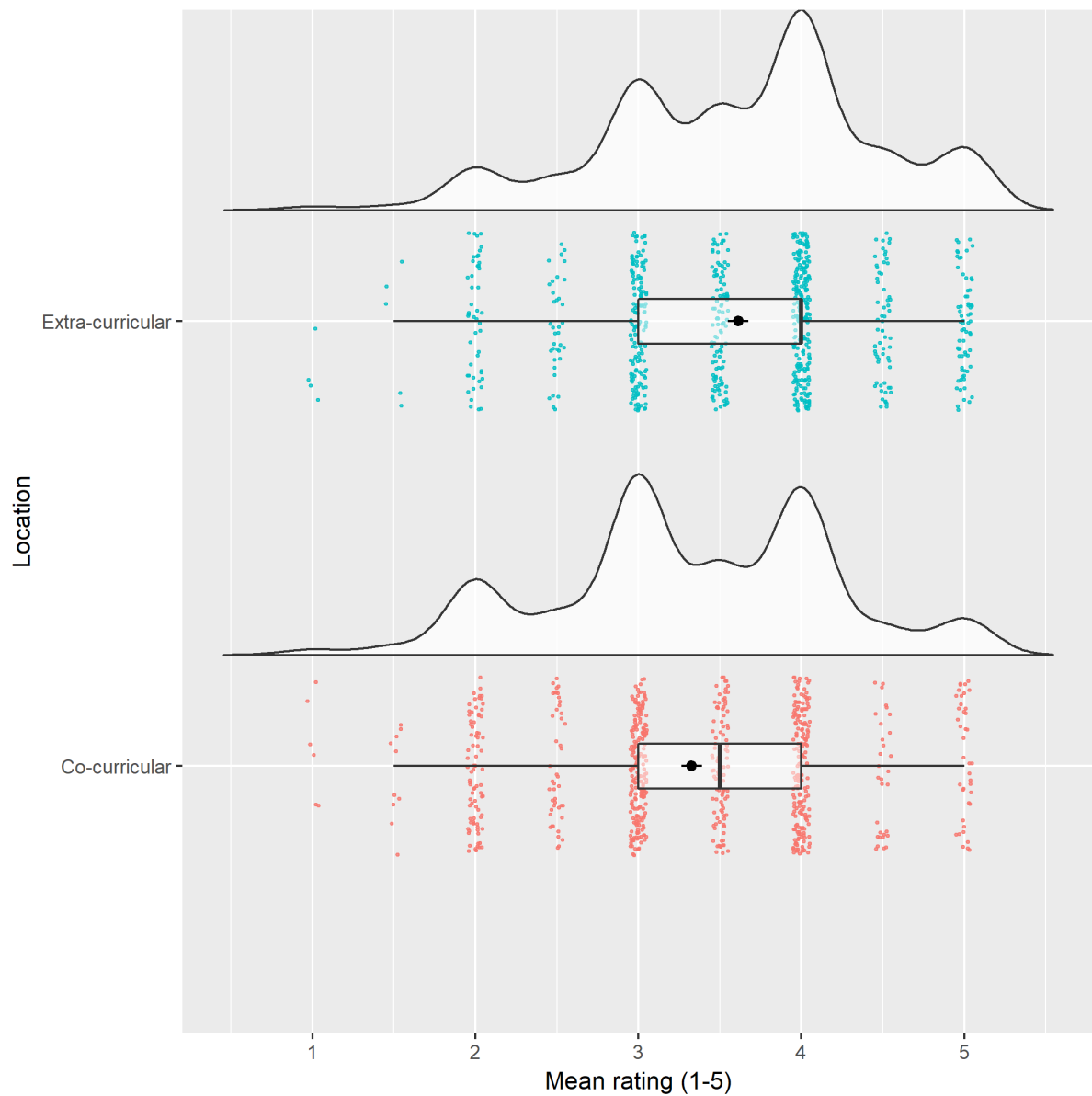


Figure 4. Raincloud plot showing raw data, density, boxplots and mean with 95% CI for location for the admin position.

#### Importance questions

For the importance questions, across all groups graduate attributes were rated as the most important for employability and degree classification was rated as the least important (Table 5 for descriptive statistics and rankings of each question).

Table 5. *Descriptive statistics for each importance question, ordered by overall ranking.*

	Student			Academic			Employer			Overall		
	Ranking	Mean score	Mean rank	Ranking	Mean score	Mean rank	Ranking	Mean score	Mean rank	Ranking	Mean score	Mean rank
Graduate attributes	1	3.65	1088.96	2	3.18	840.95	1	3.49	1001.97	1	<b>3.45</b>	<b>981.26</b>
Internship	2	3.53	1014.54	1	3.20	838.04	2	3.35	912.54	2	<b>3.37</b>	<b>924.84</b>
Apprenticeship	4	3.32	894.43	3	3.05	764.76	3	3.28	881.84	3	<b>3.22</b>	<b>848.83</b>
Extra-curricular	3	3.33	914.19	4	3.05	768.04	5	3.19	843.90	4	<b>3.20</b>	<b>844.53</b>
Volunteering	5	3.23	843.86	6	2.98	724.07	6	3.16	833.11	5	<b>3.13</b>	<b>802.03</b>
Part-time work	7	3.08	777.76	5	3.04	760.28	4	3.25	866.89	6	<b>3.12</b>	<b>801.19</b>
Co-curricular	8	3.08	760.56	9	2.76	624.05	7	2.88	670.80	7	<b>2.91</b>	<b>687.64</b>
Degree subject	6	3.10	784.38	7	2.84	653.97	8	2.61	552.46	8	<b>2.86</b>	<b>667.11</b>
Degree classification	9	2.68	573.71	8	2.80	639.98	9	2.26	388.40	9	<b>2.58</b>	<b>534.56</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>3.22</b>	<b>850.27</b>		<b>2.99</b>	<b>734.90</b>		<b>3.05</b>	<b>772.44</b>		<b>3.09</b>	<b>788.00</b>

As the importance measures were assessed through single four-point likert scales, Kruskal-Wallis tests for ordinal data were performed. A separate test for each question was conducted and then the omnibus p-values from all 9 tests were Bonferroni-Holm corrected (Table 6). Post-hoc tests were conducted using Dunn's test from the *FSA* package.

Table 6. *Omnibus Kruskal-Wallis tests for each importance question with Bonferroni-Holm corrected p-values.*

Question	Chi-square statistic	Adjusted p-value
Apprenticeship	4.392	0.528
Co-curricular	4.495	0.528
Degree classification	11.639	0.024
Degree subject	9.084	0.075
Extra-curricular	4.039	0.528
Graduate attributes	13.354	0.011
Internship	7.551	0.138
Part-time work	2.312	0.528
Volunteering	3.601	0.528

A significant effect of group was found for degree classification and graduate attributes. For degree classification, a post-hoc Dunn's test found that there was no difference between academic (mean rank = 101.18) and student (mean rank = 92.13,  $z = .880$ ,  $p = .379$ ) ratings of importance, however, employers (mean rank = 70.56) rated degree classification as significantly less important than both academics ( $z = 3.27$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and students ( $z = 2.484$ ,  $p = .026$ ).

For graduate attributes, a post-hoc Dunn's test found that there was no difference between employer (mean rank = 90.16) and student (mean rank = 100.13,  $z = 1.228$ ,  $p = .220$ ) ratings of importance, however, academics (mean rank = 72.38) rated graduate attributes as significantly less important than both employers ( $z = 2.348$ ,  $p = .038$ ) and students ( $z = 3.612$ ,  $p = .001$ ). No other significant main effects of group were found.

## **Qualitative analysis**

To ensure that the codes used to categorise the responses across the questions were reliable, two of the questions were cross-coded by two of the authors (20% of items were cross-coded,  $n = 64$  per question) with inter-rater reliability analysis conducted using the kappa statistic (Landis & Koch, 1977). The results were as follows: Question one:  $k = 0.71$ , Question two:  $k = 0.72$ . This indicated substantial agreement between the two raters.

Analysis of the qualitative data was split into two sections, the first combined the data from the first two questions: ‘how would you define ‘employability?’ and ‘in your opinion, what makes someone employable?’ The analysis of qualitative data produced themes within seven main areas (Table 7).

Table 7. *Thematic analysis of reported responses to two open-ended questions ('how would you define 'employability?' and 'in your opinion, what makes someone employable?') across three sources (student, academic, employer), organised into seven main themes.*

Response theme and sub-categories	Number of responses coded for student participants	Number of responses coded for academic participants	Number of responses coded for employer participants
<i>Skills</i>	76	84	75
Relevant skills	35	34	37
Transferable skills	10	6	7
Flexibility	1	6	0
Relevant knowledge	2	11	6
Interpersonal skills	16	16	15
Professional skills	12	11	10
<i>Experience</i>	24	20	23
Relevant experience	16	15	15
Paid job role	2	2	0
Co-curricular and extracurricular activities	3	1	0
Achievements	3	2	2
Able to retain job	0	0	6
<i>Education</i>	17	7	9
Relevant degree subject	11	3	4
Academic achievement	6	4	5
<i>Personal qualities</i>	23	16	47
Suitable personality	6	2	10
Initiative	9	10	14
Good attitude	4	2	14
Good work ethic	4	2	4
Confidence	0	0	5
<i>Fit for job</i>	20	25	17
Meet employer criteria	8	7	7
Desirable candidate	9	6	2
Ability to perform tasks	3	12	8
<i>Development</i>	2	1	3
Work ready	2	1	3
<i>Presentation</i>	1	5	10
Convey suitability	1	5	10

## *Skills*

The importance of skill and knowledge development was particularly emphasised by the academic participants. However, all groups reported that having relevant, or the ‘right skills’ was important in terms of what makes someone employable. Relevant skills were described as job specific, and as matching employer and job criteria. In contrast transferable skills were defined as more general portable skills that would be useful for any job (e.g. communication, organisational skills etc.). Relevant skills were often mentioned in combination with relevant experience and the ability to demonstrate these skills:

*‘Employability is when a candidate has the skills, attributes and personality which accurately line up with the specific needs of a job’ (Academic, P78)*

Social or interpersonal skills were also mentioned by all three groups and encompassed a range of skills from the ability to work as part of a team to the ability to deal with social situations:

*‘Most things that delineate the employable from the unemployable are basic social interaction skills and the ability to respond appropriately in social encounters’ (Employer, P117)*

## *Experience*

All groups commented on how important relevant experience was, and argued that these experiences should ideally be tailored to the specific career area requirements. This was linked to different requirements for different roles, for example, a research position might require more degree-based research experience whereas a graduate scheme might require extracurricular work experience:

*‘Either the specific or very relevant experience. A willingness to embrace the needs of the employer’. (Academic, P90)*

Employers also reported that evidence of finding and retaining a previous job was a useful indicator of employability:

*'Employability skills are those skills needed to access and retain full-time employment'*

*(Employer, P134)*

### *Education*

Students emphasized the importance of degree-subject more frequently compared to academics and employers:

*'Getting a certain type of qualification in order to find a job, where those qualifications would be used and further developed' (Student, P42)*

Students reported that a relevant degree can assist employability as it shows candidate interest in the area. A proportion of participants in each group reported that a good degree classification (2:1 or above), and a high level of academic achievement, could provide access to better opportunities.

### *Personal qualities*

Having a positive work attitude and confidence was particularly important to employers. Showing enthusiasm for the role, having an energetic or “can-do” attitude for the job, and the associated tasks was thought to be important when defining what makes someone employable:

*'Their persona, and attitude to working. It is important to be able to work with a variety of people and to be able to complete various tasks. You need to have the confidence to do what you know'. (Employer, P37)*

### *Presentation*

Employers talked about the importance of presentation more frequently than students or academics. In terms of conveying suitability for a job, CVs, interviews and application letters were the most common forms mentioned. Moreover, having appropriate skills and

knowledge was not enough when seeking employment, the ability to demonstrate these to employers was just as important:

*‘The skills and knowledge you have along with how to demonstrate them in your CV and at interviews’ (Employer, P57)*

### *Importance of employability*

Participants were also asked: ‘please discuss whether you think ‘employability’ is important and why / why not’. The majority of participants indicated that employability was important ( $n = 144$ ). Four participants reported that other elements may be more important. This included the ‘drive to succeed’ ( $n = 2$ ), ‘chemistry’ between employer and candidate and the ability to present well during interview. In addition, four academic participants reported that although employability was important, they felt that the onus for development should not be on the educational system, instead employability should be developed through partnerships between education and industry. One student participant commented that employability is subjective, another academic participant mentioned that more jobs are needed to fulfil employment expectations.

The remainder of the data was analysed through inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which produced four main themes (Table 8).

Table 8. *Thematic analysis of reported responses to one open-ended question ('please discuss whether you think 'employability' is important and why / why not') across three sources (student, academic, employer), organised into four main themes.*

Response theme and sub-categories	Number of responses coded for student participants	Number of responses coded for academic participants	Number of responses coded for employer participants
<i>Job market</i>	<i>51</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>27</i>
Career entry	24	17	14
More competitive	14	6	3
Better job	8	2	2
Identify best career fit	3	3	6
Return on investment	2	1	2
<i>Development</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>13</i>
Supports self-development	8	6	6
Enables promotion	1	3	2
Supports job retention	0	1	1
Ensures trained staff	2	0	1
Supports economic growth	0	0	3
<i>Selection process</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>25</i>
Criteria for selection decisions	4	9	17
Ensures candidate meets employer expectations	1	2	2
Benefits employer	5	2	6
<i>Wellbeing</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>2</i>
Promotes life satisfaction	3	6	2

### *Job market*

Employability was reported as vital for career entry, both at a basic level of being able to secure a job after graduation, and as a gateway to a chosen career path. This was particularly emphasised by student participants:

*'Very important for students - in order to progress to postgraduate study and further their careers they need to be highly employable. If they are not employable they will not be able to progress or fully utilise their potential'. (Student, P17)*

Several students commented that employability was necessary to get a well-paid job with good opportunities for advancement. Participants also indicated that the process of gaining employability was useful for students to identify the career area that was the best fit for them, where they would be happiest and most productive:

*'Employability is important because it allows individuals to understand what they enjoy doing and what they are good at' (Employer, P105).*

Several participants mentioned that employability was considered a necessary outcome of a University education, with the assumption being that employability skills would be gained as part of a degree education.

#### *Development*

All participant groups commented on employability as an integral part of self-development. The student participants reported that learning about employability helped to provide them with a structure for future development; through identifying employer expectations and their own strengths and weaknesses they were able to set goals and tailor their development to suit their future career:

*'It gives me an idea of where I am and where I have to improve to increase my chances to get employed' (Student, P125)*

A proportion of employer participants also identified employability as important to society, whereby the selection of candidates with the necessary skills to support industry helps to improve economic development.

#### *Selection process*

Although all participant groups mentioned employability as an aspect of the recruitment process, this was predominantly emphasised by the employer group. Employers reported that the development of employability skills was vital in order to produce candidates with the necessary skills to do the job. They also commented that assessment of

employability via consideration of experience gained helped them make selection decisions that would ensure they selected the right candidate for the job:

*‘Employability is important to businesses as it can be used to gauge whether a candidate is a suitable match for a position’ (Employer, P88)*

## **Discussion**

The experimental vignette results indicate that the location of work experience, whether it is extra or co-curricular, can impact perception of employability, with extracurricular experience viewed more favourably by students, academics and employers. The type of experience, whether it is an internship or volunteer role, was also an influence when the job role was a high level graduate role (research assistant) but not when the role was administrative. The duration of experience appeared to have a mixed impact, with co-curricular experience viewed more favourably when the duration was two years, but the inverse being the case for extracurricular experience.

The additional quantitative items indicate that there were no significant differences in stakeholder perception of work experience, though group differences were found regarding the importance of degree classification and graduate attributes. Across all three groups degree classification was rated least important for employability, with graduate attributes rated most important. Finally, the qualitative data indicated that the level of relevancy of both experience and degree topic was considered important for employability, along with interpersonal and professional skills.

### **Work experience**

The current findings support previous research indicating that extracurricular activities are viewed favourably when assessing graduate employability (Clark et al., 2015). This effect applied to both job roles, indicating that extracurricular experience may be considered more beneficial than co-curricular experience generally. The result may be

partially explained by the qualitative data regarding relevant experience. Stakeholders indicated that an important element of experience was that it should be relevant for the selected career area, this generally encompassed ‘on the job’ experience that could only be gained via extracurricular activities. This is in line with research conducted by Barr and McNeilly (2002), who also report that extracurricular activities are considered to provide real world experience, which graduate recruiters view positively during selection. Andrews and Higson (2008) report that employers consider work experience within organisations, part- or full-time, to be integral to graduate employability. Such experience was considered to provide students with insight into the business environment, including how to interact with others in the workplace (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Co-curricular experience, though potentially important for the development of transferable skills, might not provide the same level of insight into the workplace.

The qualitative data regarding experience suggests that both internships and volunteer roles could achieve the same goals in terms of the student showing initiative, gaining experience of the workplace and relevancy to career area. Despite this all three stakeholder groups considered volunteer experience less positively than internship roles when assessing employability specific to the research role. This suggests that the merit of volunteer experience as an avenue to improve employability may depend on the career area that the student intends to pursue on graduation. This may, in part, be due to the complexity of volunteering as an employability strategy. Research indicates that volunteering behavior can be altruistic, prompted by a desire to help and support others (Meier, 2006). Alternatively, volunteering can be considered an investment, with volunteering linked to skill acquisition and a higher wage when employed (Hackl, Halla & Pruckner, 2007). In either case volunteering roles are not often competitive, and may vary in terms of commitment level. In contrast internships are more straightforward, being competitive with inherent selection

processes, often job specific and associated with multiple benefits, including enhanced academic achievement (Binder, Baguley, Crook & Miller, 2015).

The final element, duration of experience, did not produce a main effect within the current study. This suggests that the length of an experience may be less important than the type of experience, or whether the experience is extra or co-curricular. The qualitative data indicates that employers do look for evidence of prior job retention, this suggests that a defined period of experience is useful for employability. However, none of the participants specified a minimum duration for experience. It is possible that the six months duration examined in the current study was not a short enough period to produce a difference in perception of employability. Future studies could consider including shorter periods, such as two or three months, to investigate what the minimum duration is for experience to still be considered relevant.

### **Stakeholder perception of work experience**

In contrast to the expected 'gap' in perception of work experience across stakeholders, the current sample were similar in their perception and assessment of work experience within the vignette section of the questionnaire. This mirrors research conducted by Crossman and Clarke (2010) who also reported general stakeholder agreement, in their case on the importance of international experience for business students. There were some differences within the current qualitative data, with employers emphasising the importance of personal qualities, such as confidence, in comparison to students and academics. Employers also highlighted the link between employability and applicant selection, whereas academics focused more on students gaining additional knowledge and practicing work-based tasks. Students placed more emphasis on career entry, and the importance of a relevant degree subject. The sample were uniform in their overall perception of the relevancy of experience being one of the most important aspects of work experience. Finally, the analysis of the

quantitative items suggests that employers are least concerned with degree classification, and academics are least concerned with graduate attributes across the groups. These findings suggest that rather than a uniform ‘gap’ in expectations, there are likely to be some areas of agreement, alongside areas where perception, or emphasis, still differs across the groups.

### **Limitations**

The experimental methodology used for the vignette element enabled the control and manipulation of defined variables. However, the scenarios presented were fictional, and concentrated on specific elements of work experience. It is possible that participants did not assess the presented CV excerpts as they would in real life; full CVs may increase immersion in the assessment of vignettes in future work (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). The study is also subject to participant bias and is reliant on participant honesty.

### **Practical implications**

The current findings may go some way towards helping educators to provide students with advice regarding their activities outside the classroom. It is important to be mindful of practical considerations when designing guidance. For example, students are increasingly under pressure to juggle multiple time commitments, and to balance external activities with class attendance (Barr & Mcneilly, 2002) in addition to variable availability of certain types of experience depending upon subject area and location. However, based upon our findings we propose five key points that can be used as the basis of discussion with students about work experience. First, extracurricular experience, and second, internships, are generally viewed more favourably than co-curricular or voluntary positions respectively. Third, although there is not yet enough research to establish a critical duration, it appears that staying in the same position for a relatively long period of time adds little value and may well be viewed less positively than multiple, short-term projects that diversify the students’ experience. Fourth, a key focus should be on relevancy, ideally all experience should be

linked to the student's career plans rather than completed in an attempt to improve transferable skills alone. Finally, taking all the above into consideration alongside the practical limitations aforementioned, employers still rated co-curricular and volunteering experience as more important than degree classification or degree subject, in short, something will always be better than nothing.

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