

Media Release: Student Expectations

Graduate Careers Australia

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New research provides valuable insights into student perceptions and expectations.

Good training and development, and interesting and challenging work, are what today's tertiary students want in their future full-time employment. The students also indicate a greater intention to remain in their 'ideal' job following graduation than employers are experiencing, according to Graduate Careers Australia's 2007 University and Beyond survey.

Contrary to perceived generational differences, the innovative new survey, the largest of its kind in Australia, found a high level of consistency between generations regarding what was important in their employment, and also found that today's students are presenting to employers as more confident than they actually feel.

The University and Beyond 2007 reports are based on a survey of the expectations and perceptions of 32,000 university students, a student demographic that is of key interest to organisations wishing to attract, recruit, and retain their leaders and employees of the future. With such a high level of response, the survey allows an in-depth analysis of the results by a wide variety of differing demographic profiles.

The broad scope of GCA's research activities has also allowed some of the major findings from the University and Beyond survey to be coupled with information collected in GCA's *Graduate Outlook Survey* (a survey of graduate employers) and GCA's *Australian Graduate Survey* (a survey of the outcomes of new graduates). Presenting the link between university student perceptions, employer perceptions and graduate outcomes has allowed for some new and unique insights into graduate recruitment, as well as confirming some existing perceptions.

Summary results of the survey are included in *Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007*, which is available free of charge on the GCA website (www.graduatecareers.com.au).

Expectations of working life

Over 95 per cent of tertiary students who anticipate beginning work in a new full-time role following university agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about their expectations of their future working life:

- *It is important to have good training opportunities and be developing new skills; and*
- *Conducting work that is interesting and challenging is important to me.*

An additional significant outcome of the U&B survey is the analysis of these (and further) working life expectations across generational groupings (Generation Y, Generation X and Baby Boomers). There was a high level of 'generational consistency' for the highest ranked areas of importance, an indication that **some of the areas commonly perceived as being of particular significance to 'Generation Y' students are, in fact, of equal or higher importance to other generations as well**¹.

These findings highlight the necessity to avoid making "generational assumptions" about students and new graduates, as early indications from this new research are that it may be that the work life expectations and perceptions of potential employees across all age groups are changing, not just the candidates who can be classified as "Gen Y".

Benefits and Remuneration

Company paid training and development was found to be the most attractive, non-cash benefit a graduate recruiter can offer a new graduate (76 per cent of students). Graduate employers also rated this as what they felt students would perceive as the most attractive non-cash benefit an employer could offer a new graduate (75 per cent of employers – Graduate Outlook Survey, 2007)².

Additional leave through rostered days off (rdo) or time-off in lieu (56 per cent) and superannuation (54 per cent) were also rated by students as very attractive employment benefits. Although the former was rated highly by graduate employers as a benefit attractive to graduates (42 per cent), ***superannuation was not perceived by employers to be one of the more attractive benefits they could offer graduates (14 per cent).***

When asked about the importance of salary in their employment decision making process, over 90 per cent of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I would consider the overall package as well as the salary component"³. Around 84 per cent also agreed that the "salary would at least need to be comparable to other offers".

While the overall remuneration package is important to students when considering job offers, the value of ensuring that the actual salary proposed is comparable with that being paid by other recruiters is also still important.

Retention

Employers have identified retention of graduates as an issue of on-going concern in relation to graduate employment (Graduate Outlook Survey, 2007).

When asked about their expected length of employment in their ideal job with their first employer following graduation, nearly two-thirds of students felt that they

¹ Table 4 in Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007

² The reports: Graduate Outlook 2007 and Snapshot: Graduate Outlook 2007; are available from www.graduatecareers.com.au

³ Table 5 in Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007

would stay with their first employer for at least three years⁴. Just over a third felt they would stay between one and three years, with another third estimating that they would stay for at least five years.

However, when graduate employers were asked how long they thought an average graduate would stay with them, over half of the employers surveyed felt the average graduate would leave within the first three years. Only 13 per cent of employers felt that graduates would stay more than five years.

The difference between student and employer expectations suggests that many graduates may go into their first employment following graduation with the expectation of staying longer than they actually do, or that the students are not perceiving their first job as being 'ideal'.

Confidence and Expectations

Nearly two-thirds of students were strongly confident (very confident or extremely confident) of finding full-time employment following graduation, with 91 per cent broadly confident (confident, very confident or extremely confident)⁵.

However, confidence levels dropped as the type of job moved closer to one related to their field of study, or to their 'preferred or ideal' job. Just under 50 per cent were strongly confident, with around 81 per cent broadly confident of obtaining a job in their field following graduation. Confidence levels dropped even further when students were asked about finding *their preferred or ideal job*, with around a quarter strongly confident (and 39 per cent not confident), and just over 60 per cent broadly confident of finding their preferred job following graduation.

By way of contrast, graduate employers' perceptions of students' confidence in finding employment post-graduation (as determined in the Graduate Outlook Survey 2007) was higher than the confidence levels suggested by the students themselves, particularly in relation to the 'ideal' or 'preferred' job.

This has relevance for the assessment and selection of candidates and when developing induction and graduate intake programs. On a positive note, employers may also therefore find that the students can present themselves confidently and professionally (for example, to clients) even if they are not as internally confident.

Generic Skills

The development of generic employability skills during a university education is a topic often discussed, and graduate recruiters rank areas such as "Interpersonal and Communication Skills", and "Critical Reasoning/Problem Solving" as the most important selection criteria for recruiting graduates (Graduate Outlook Survey, 2007).

⁴ Table 7 in Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007

⁵ Table 3 in Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007

When asked to rate their generic employability skills from *non-existent* to *very strong* on a five point scale, 82 per cent of students rated their communication skills as *fairly strong* to *very strong*⁶. This was followed by students' learning ability, their self-management skills and their skills with technology (80 per cent, 78 per cent and 74 per cent). Students rated themselves lowest on their problem solving skills (54 per cent rated as *fairly strong* or *very strong*) and initiative and enterprise (60 per cent).

When examined by course stage, we see that students' generic employability skills self-ratings increase the further through their course they are. This was particularly the case for problem solving, where 41 per cent of students at the beginning of their course rated their problem solving skills as *fairly strong* to *very strong* and for students nearing completion of their course, 62 per cent rated their skills at the same level, a difference of 20.2 percentage points.

This suggests that, while students may not see themselves as necessarily having equal strength in all of the generic skills areas, there is a steady growth in these areas over the course of their university education. This finding, coupled with the students' strong desire for (and expectation of) opportunities for further training and development, provides some indication to employers that they can expect a continued increase in these generic skills as the students enter the workforce and gain workplace experience.

The Future

The snapshot report presents a brief overview of the findings from this important new GCA survey into student expectations and perceptions. The final University and Beyond report will be available in the coming weeks and will focus in detail on these and additional issues.

Cindy Tilbrook, Executive Director of Graduate Careers Australia said, "As the largest and most comprehensive survey of its kind conducted in Australia in this area, we hope that these new survey findings will provide valuable information to those seeking to attract and retain the vital student/graduate demographic."

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⁶ Table 6 in Snapshot: University and Beyond 2007