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The Job Seeking Experiences of International Graduates in the Host Country: Australia's Lost Opportunity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the job seeking experiences of international graduates in attempting to obtain meaningful work in their university education host country. Qualitative feedback on the specific job seeking barriers and experiences in the host country after graduating were provided by 696 respondents. The findings suggest that the specific barriers to finding employment were their visa status, lack of work experience and perceived discriminatory practices of potential employers and/or their agents. The study also suggests that the discriminatory employment experiences of international university graduates demonstrate a lack of congruence between the concept of best fit in hiring decision making and a culturally diverse Australian labour market. Not only do the current practices limit the source of potential highly educated, skilled and culturally aware employees into the labour market of the host country, it also severely compromises an organisation's ability to achieve workplace diversity; a strategic outcome necessary to compete within a highly competitive global economy.

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global economy, it is vital to business that the best talent is attracted, employed, trained, developed and managed in order to meet the strategic and operational objectives of the organisation. International students have been acknowledged as a trustworthy and valuable source of recruitment for host countries (Beine, Noël and Ragot, 2014). Since the early 1990s, Australia's higher education policy has been one of an export approach, whereby the education of foreign students was turned into a highly successful export industry in which universities were free to set their own fee levels and became one of the country's largest export income earners (Adams, 2007). Australia remains one of the most

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aggressive countries in recruiting international students as Australian government facilitates the recruitment of international students through post-study work rights visa, which is free of visa sponsorship costs (Sá & Sabzalieva, 2017; Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017).

In the current economic environment, a key policy concern for most higher education institutions globally has been their professional relevance to the labour market and the development of appropriate graduate employability competencies (Pavlin, 2014). To this end universities are investing heavily, both in time and resources, in employability strategies such as the development and articulation of graduate attributes, competencies, work integrated learning strategies and partnerships/accreditation with professional associations. For instance, in Australia, some universities embed occupational English language units into the curriculum in response to concern around international students' inadequate English language skills (Blackmore et al., 2014). Furthermore, the Australian government seeks to increase Australia's share of international students. Based on the National Strategy for International Education 2025, facilitating post-study work opportunities through regular engagement between government agencies, education providers, business and industry is one of the main strategies identified to improve Australia's role as a global leader in education, training and research (Australian Government, 2016). Regardless of all decision-makers' efforts, international graduates' employment outcomes remain a cause for growing concerns; thus, further studies are essential to investigate the intentional graduates' employment experience (Tran, 2015).

Primarily, this study seeks to retrospectively investigate the employment intentions of international students prior to graduation as well as their post-study experiences in seeking meaningful work in Australia. Meaningful work refers to the work that is appropriate to the degree qualification and makes use of skills, knowledge and abilities (Nabi, 2003). The core objective of this research is to ascertain which perceived obstacles hindered international graduates' post-study meaningful work opportunities. In addition, the research team sought the opinion of graduates on how universities could improve and enhance intentional graduates' professional experience in Australia. These personal opinions and perceptions, based upon their own job seeking journeys, add a powerful and rich dimension to existing studies in this area. Finally, a particular interest of this study is to identify the way in which post-study employment opportunities impact international graduates' intentions to remain in Australia as a host country.

Theoretical assumption

Inspired by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964; 1993), education is considered an investment to increase the employability of workforce that

results in organisational and personal productivity (Nafukho et al., 2004). Training and development of human resources is the central principle underpinning Human Capital Theory, which suggests the individual leading capacity is a source involved in the production of goods and services (Becker, 1964; 1993). From this perspective, the key element in selection decision making is ensuring, as far as possible, that potential candidates are the 'best fit' for the organisation: how well the candidate fits the job, the organisation and the work environment. Edwards and Billsberry (2010) suggest that the concept of 'fit' is derived from many studies attempting to link the person, the job, the environment and the organisation, with all of them analysing how the person and the work environment link together to predict a performance outcome.

Best fit is determined by the applicant's fit to the job in terms of competency requirements (person-job fit) and fit to the organisational values and culture (person-organisation fit). Previous research has shown that the better the match between the candidate and the job and organisation, the higher the levels of job satisfaction, commitment and retention (Arthur et al., 2006; Boon et al., 2011; Kristof, 1996). However, research has also indicated that the practice of best fit in hiring human capital, particularly person-organisation fit, can also lead to discriminatory behaviour through the application of narrow or homogeneous organisational norms and culture (Bjorklund, Backstrom & Wolgast, 2012; Cable & Judge, 1997; Dietz et al., 2015).

The present study focuses on international graduates as a source of productivity; thus, the cultural fit can be encompassed within the concept of best fit. The Model of Cultural Fit (MCF) suggests that the culture of an organisation consists of managerial beliefs and assumptions which impact employees and the task performed (Kanungo and Jaeger, 1990). The internal work culture then has a direct impact on the application of the human resource functions, including recruitment and selection, work design and performance management (Mendonca and Kanungo, 1994). The MCF model emphasises the dichotomy between the best fit for the organisation and the potential for discriminatory employment practices. The existence of such discriminatory behaviour, albeit illegal in Australia, severely impacts the achievement of workplace cultural diversity – a strategic human resource management strategy and goal for many organisations.

In other words, the issue of discrimination could be driven by the existing 'best fit' concept, specifically ethnic discrimination. Whilst some argued that ethnic job candidates are, on average, less educated, unfamiliar with host country networks, or have host country language difficulties, differences in economic outcomes still persist amongst candidates,

irrespective of qualifications and experience (Tubergen, 2014). Thereby, a large number of international students who study abroad face a challenging decision: whether to return home at the end of their studies or to pursue employment and/or residency in the host country (Adams, 2007). In other words, the intentional graduates' main challenge is to match their qualifications, skills, and experience to areas of vacancy and need within the labour market of the host country.

The breaches of country equal employment opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation are well cited by the media – on a regular basis. Such breaches may be indirect, due to a lack of recruiter training (Shen, et al., 2009) or recruiters selecting candidates on the basis of person-organisation fit, whereby the employing organisation norms impact selection decision making (Bjorklund, Backstrom & Wolgast, 2012; Cable & Judge, 1997; Dietz et al., 2015). Rivera (2012) suggested that interviewers made conscious attempts to remain objective in recruitment and selection decision making, but were also making decisions based on a cultural fit with themselves. Clearly, best fit and cultural fit may lead to quite different conclusions in the employee recruitment and selection process. Immigrant job applicants are less likely to demonstrate a cultural fit in the job interview and are therefore likely to be rejected (Bye et al., 2014). Tilbury and Colic-Peisker (2006) found that migrant job applicants were at a disadvantage along with those who have a 'disability, ugliness and deafness.'(2006:658). However, the ways in which migrant job applicants are disadvantaged, from the perspective of the job seeker themselves, is more scant in the existing literature.

Literature review

The issue

The most important role of higher education is to provide employable graduates for the labour market (Jackson and Wilton, 2016). In order to achieve this, key policy and decision makers working in university systems need to be aware of the skills and attributes needed by students in order to successfully develop their careers upon graduation as well as how to support them if their intention is to remain in the host country (Jackling, 2007; Nunes and Arthur, 2013). Given the fees paid by international students, as well as the virtues espoused about studying overseas, it could be argued that universities have an economic and moral obligation to prepare international students for meaningful careers post study. However, the commodification of Australia's higher education system has created unrealistic expectations in the minds of international graduates (James and Otsuka, 2009).

Some research suggests that international students have clear advantages in their host country – in terms of employment – due to their familiarisation (during the course of their study) with host country customs, culture and norms (Nunes and Arthur, 2013). They also possess international knowledge and networks, leading to improved potential for more rapid upward mobility, greater financial rewards and increased social status upon returning to their home country (Yan and Berliner, 2011; Zweig, Changgui, and Rosen, 2004). Certainly, countries such as Japan, a notable investor in China, recognised the importance of skilled Chinese graduates from their Japanese host universities, and provided occupational 'niching' employment visas, with a vast number of Japanese companies 'snapping them up' to work in large Chinese teams liaising with Chinese businesses (Liu-Farrer, 2011).

Whilst the Australian census and the OECD regularly report relatively high levels of post-migration employment, there is little evidence to suggest equivalent rates of employment in skilled/professional employment appropriate to qualifications and/or skills held – particularly during periods of economic downturn. The 2011 Continuous Survey of Australia's Migrants (CSAM) found that one in four migrants with an Australian qualification in management and commerce worked in non-professional/management roles in accommodation and food services, and one in five in wholesale and retail trade (Buddlemeyer, Van de Ven and Zakirova, 2013). Further, the results of the 2011 Graduate Destination Study show that comparatively overseas-born students graduating with an Australian degree are half as likely to be employed in a professional role than those graduates who are Australian born (Buddlemeyer, Van de Ven and Zakirova, 2013). More recently, the findings of the Australian 2015 Graduate Outlook Report found that almost half of survey respondents indicated that international graduates represented between only one and ten per cent of their intake (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Such findings are congruent with data from the United Kingdom, where superior employment outcomes for white business and graduate degree graduates, even though non-Caucasian graduates reported higher levels of skill and employability development from their course of study than their white peers (Wilton, 2011).

Whilst it has been established that a critical role of universities is to provide graduates for the job market, whose responsibility it is for ensuring an adequate level of employability of such graduates is one which is not as clear-cut. Pavlin (2014) explored the perceptions of higher education academics in how well graduates are prepared for entry into the labour market. He defined employability as *an individual's ability to obtain a meaningful job* (p. 580). Recent studies in both the UK and

Australia highlight the pressure on tertiary institutions to produce work-ready graduates and the need to invest in work-based learning so they are better equipped in the labour market post-graduation (Balta, Coughlan and Hobson, 2012; Jackson and Wilton, 2016).

Graduate employability is also an expectation of international graduates choosing to remain in the host country. Szelenyi (2006) refers to this as brain migration, whereby the international students' primary goal in relation to migration is to enhance their human capital. The number of students who crossed national borders for educational purposes rose from 0.6 million in 1975 to over 4 million by 2008, and UNESCO estimates the number will approach 8 million by 2025 (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, and Hartel, 2013, p. 656). Gribble et al. (2015) found that international students' lack of realistic knowledge about the availability of employment, internships and work placements, resulted in potential damage to Australia's higher education reputation, and image globally (p. 414). These expectations were reinforced in a 2015 study of Chinese international business graduates, where the vast majority claimed they chose to study in Australia in order to gain permanent residency (Tharenou, 2015). However, recent research findings suggest if the skills and qualifications of foreign workers increase, the less likely they are to find employment in the host country (Dietz, 2015, p. 1318; Nyland et al., 2013).

Workplace Diversity and Discrimination

Human resource policy, globally, encourages and supports the need for organisations to adopt diversity management practices. The adoption and practice of workplace diversity activities acknowledge the differences between peoples' beliefs, values and understanding in any given context. A culturally diverse workforce is common in western economies, and corporations globally, but it is still considered a 'hot button' issue (Shen et al, 2009). In particular, recruitment and selection practices not only need to ensure compliance with the relevant country's equal employment opportunity legislation, but also needs to be designed in such a way to ensure that each employing organisation maintains a highly skilled and diverse workforce that can be sustained in a highly competitive and ever-changing global environment. Australia has in place, at both the Federal and State levels, anti-discrimination and affirmative action legislation, including the Race Discrimination Act 1975 and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1996. Equal opportunity in employment is now perceived as a core value in organisations globally, not just Australia (Harcourt, Lam and Harcourt, 2005). Australia also has in place affirmative action legislation which requires public bodies and organisations with 100 or more employees to establish programs to improve the employment and

promotion of women in the workplace. They are also required to report to a federal government department annually.

This is a vast departure from Government philosophy up until the 1960s, whereby the 'White Australia' policy, specifically aimed at excluding non-Caucasians into the country, was the overriding guiding principle in recruitment and selection (Lewis, French and Phetmany, 2000, p. 105). However, recent research has found that workforce diversity is still not well understood or appreciated, particularly by line managers who are not HR specialists (Davis, Frolova, and Callahan, 2015). Gribble et al. (2013) also found that employers were less likely to offer international students internships/placements/work experience due to a perceived lack of return on investment from international students who require sponsorship or may return to their home country. The study findings highlighted impediments such as a lack of English language proficiency and poor familiarity with local networks also limited the employment opportunities of international students. Jackling (2007), in her interviews with large Australian accounting firm employers, found that they were quite honest in their feedback that international students were unlikely to gain graduate employment with them. Another similar study with large Australian accounting firms again found little support for international graduates, with one employer citing that only one percent of those who applied for work received an offer (Birrell and Healy, 2008). These findings support the work of Shen et al. (2009) that there is no actual empirical evidence that workforce diversity is managed effectively, or successfully, in organisations, and yet such diversity is historically used to provide a legal defense against charges of discrimination.

Discrimination, specifically ethnic discrimination in the labour market, has generally been focussed on the issue of wage discrimination. Data on wage differentials have provided mechanisms for the implementation of legislation and policy to prohibit and manage such issues. However, discrimination at the entry point of the labour market, particularly in recruitment and selection processes is more difficult to assess and manage due to the more indirect nature of such decision making. However, the emphasis on the assessment of candidate 'soft skills', such as teamwork, interpersonal skills, and use of initiative, leads to an increased propensity for discrimination in recruitment decision making, based on the subjective nature of such selection criteria (Moss and Tilly, 1996). It has also been found that discrimination against minority group candidates can occur even if the majority and minority group employee expected productivity is the same (Carlsson & Rooth, 2008, 2).

A number of field experiments conducted since the 1950s offer strong evidence of the existence of discrimination in hiring decision making,

with a meta-analysis finding that minority candidates need to send out 50% more applications to be invited for interview than majority group applicants (Zschirnt and Ruidin, 2016, 1128). There is also evidence that a host country's national culture can unintentionally lead to discriminatory employment interviews for foreign-born job applicants (Manroop, Boekhorst, and Harrison, 2013); or that applicants with Asian names would need to apply for more jobs than those with Anglo-Saxon names in order to achieve a positive outcome (Leigh, Booth, and Varganova, 2009). In their study of international accounting graduates, studying and looking for meaningful employment in Australia, James and Otsuka (2009) also found evidence of employment discrimination against Chinese graduates. Similarly, Carlsson and Rooth (2008), in their Swedish study of job seekers new to the employment market, found that the probability of being invited to interview was 10% less for someone with a Middle Eastern background.

This appears to counter arguments that international experience increased the employability of graduates (Crossman and Clarke, 2009). The term 'international experience' needs to be further defined in the context of employability. The employment mode, country where experience was gained, job performed and duration of such international experience need to be examined, along with the impact that each criterion has had upon meaningful graduate employability. However, additional studies tracking Chinese foreign business graduates, found that it was issues related to job and career dissatisfaction, unemployment and hiring bias and discrimination that were the most frequent reasons for departure from the host country (James and Otsuka, 2009; Tharenou and Seet, 2014). Previous research on international migrants suggests that their employment opportunities are not only shaped by their skills but unfortunately also by the perceptions of the host society (Syed, 2008). Tharenou (2015) suggested there existed a lack of comparative research to indicate if the discriminatory employment seeking experiences of Chinese graduates in Australia was better or worse than elsewhere in the world. What is clear, is that employment-related racial and/or ethnic discrimination limits job opportunities and career progression (Forstenlechner & Al-Waqfi, 2010). What is less clear, is the specific nature of the discriminatory behaviour/actions migrant/international job seekers experience when searching for meaningful employment.

Discriminatory recruitment practices against international graduates and migrants are often indirect, with applicants for positions simply being overlooked. Discriminatory employment refers to the unfair treatment of potential candidates on the basis of demographic criteria, such as gender, age, country of birth, religious or political conviction,

disability or family responsibility. The extent of discrimination in recruitment and selection practices is difficult to quantify due to the challenges in the measurement and documenting of cases, particularly when it is indirect (Pager, 2007). Employers usually treat foreign qualifications and work experience, particularly for those from developing countries, as less worthy than local qualifications and experience (Bjorlund, Backstrom & Wolfgast, 2012; Petersen & Dietz, 2005; Syed, 2008). Whilst this is generally acknowledged to be ethnic discrimination, Rivera (2012) suggests that it is a process of 'cultural matching', whereby employers sought candidates that were culturally similar to themselves in terms of lifestyle, hobbies and experiences. However, although the Australian Equal Employment Opportunity legislation would merely label this as indirect discrimination it does have implications for workplace diversity. Dietz et al., (2015) discuss the issue of 'skill discounting', whereby the international skills, education, experience and knowledge of 'foreign' candidates are valued as inferior to 'local' candidate skill attributes. They used the term 'skill paradox' to explain the phenomenon of the employability of skilled international labour, in comparison to local labour, actually decreases as their level of education, skill and knowledge increases.

Perceived job discrimination, also highlights the validity of perceived discrimination by job applicants, and its impact on potential litigation activities, loss of skilled potential candidates and credibility of recruitment and selection practices (Goldman et al., 2006; Patterson and Zibarras, 2011). From the candidates' point of view, the impact of the perceived discrimination may be reduced psychological well-being (Harris et al., 2004); negative job attitudes and an increased likelihood for employees' to take action against their employers' (Harris, Lievens and Van Hoye, 2004). In the case of international graduates who perceive discrimination in recruitment and selection, the response could also include returning to their home country (Tharenou, 2015). The literature is more limited in exploring the perceived discriminatory experiences of international graduates, even more so for those who are able to provide a narrative of their job seeking journeys.

Given the literature discussion on the important economic role of universities to provide employable graduates, the reliance on international students, the post-study expectations of international graduates and discriminatory employment practices in employee recruitment and selection, the following research questions were posited:

RQ1: *What are the experiences of international graduates from Australian universities when seeking meaningful employment in the host country?*

RQ2: *What are the key factors impacting the ability of international graduates to secure meaningful employment in the host country?*

RQ3: *What is the impact of these experiences on international graduates' intentions to remain in the host country?*

Methods

A qualitative analysis of respondent comments regarding their journey to finding meaningful employment provided the opportunity for a greater insight into the impediments and barriers they faced. The analysis of respondent experiences and/or perceptions is a valid approach to identifying discrimination in hiring. Veenman (2010) uses the term 'victim research' to describe such a methodological approach, and suggests that perceptions of exclusion from the labour market, along with perceived discrimination can impact job-seeking behaviour. A limitation of this approach is that respondent perception may deviate from other possible explanations for their lack of employment success. However, the existence of perceived discriminatory behaviour is also considered to be valid in exploring the job seeking experiences of this particular group of university graduates. Veenman (2010) suggests that the reality of discrimination in hiring is often too complex for a statistical or more 'objective' approach.

Following university ethics approval, a web-based self-administered survey composed of open-ended and close-ended questions was designed to capture mainly qualitative and demographic data. After consultation and approval from the host university Alumni services, the web-based survey was distributed to international graduates by the host university Alumni association. The sample was limited to those who had graduated between 2011 and 2016, which represents a maximum of five years - post-graduation.

Sample

A total of 874 valid responses were received for the survey (14% response rate) with a relatively equitable gender distribution of 48.17 percent female and 51.83 percent male participants. As expected of a higher education cohort, the majority of respondents were represented in the 25 to 34 years of age range (44.87%), followed by the 35-44 years age range (24.94%). Diversity existed in the country of birth, with the highest representation being Malaysia 22.36% and Singapore 18.43%. This was followed by Indonesia with 9.34 percent; Hong Kong 4.67 percent; China 3.69 percent; Sri Lanka 3.93 percent; Other 15.97 percent representing

the ethnic diversity of the sample with a list of 40 other countries listed. The majority of the respondents (89.95%) stated they were not Australian citizens at the time of the survey. The majority of respondents had graduated within the past five years (41.4%).

When questioned on the Faculty/School their course of study was located, there was a heavy concentration of study, at both Bachelor and Post Graduate degree levels, in Business/Management and Law, with 40 percent and 38 percent respectively. Studies in the Faculty of Health Sciences were represented by 16% of Bachelor degree graduates and 18 percent Post Graduate studies. The third highest area of study represented was Engineering and Mining, with 12 percent at a Bachelor degree level, and 15 percent at postgraduate level.

Research survey

A total of 28 closed and open-ended questions were designed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data sought to gather information regarding the demographic profile of the respondents, employment status, course of study, and mobility intentions. In addition, participants were asked to indicate if they had difficulties obtaining a job interview in Australia using job seeking barriers suggested by Tharenou (2015). Thenceforth, participants were requested to identify the barriers they experienced in achieving meaningful post-study employment on a 7-Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The potential barriers reported by participants included employers and recruiters' discrimination, employers and recruiters' perception of their visa status and retention, lack of meaningful jobs in their field, lack of local work experience, lack of meaningful work experience, and lack of English language proficiency.

The survey design also allowed for respondents to comment further on their specific experiences in finding meaningful post studying employment. Open-ended questions were utilised in the survey and received 696 responses. These questions included the opportunity to comment on any employment barriers not covered by the survey (n = 103); what the university could do to assist international students in finding employment after graduating (n = 232); what Australian recruiters needed to be aware of when recruiting International graduates from Australian universities (n = 185); and how Australian employers could improve their recruitment practices (n = 176). The inclusion of both closed and open-ended questions in the survey design meant that the host country employment inhibitors identified by the participants could be further explained and expanded upon, allowing for a greater

Table 1. Gender, Education level and campus

Gender	Campuses	Diploma	Bachelor degree	Graduate Certificate/ Diploma	Master degree	Doctorate/PhD degree	Total %
Female	Australia campus	5	143	9	68	10	235 (30.16)
	Singapore campus	0	52	1	3	0	56 (7.19)
	Malaysia campus	0	22	1	0	0	23 (2.95)
	Offshore partners	0	42	1	7	1	51 (6.55)
	Online	2	3	1	1	0	7 (0.90)
Male	Australia campus	0	132	15	99	16	262 (33.63)
	Singapore campus	0	29	0	9	0	38 (4.79)
	Malaysia campus	0	25	0	2	0	27 (3.65)
	Offshore partners	0	58	0	18	1	77 (9.88)
	Online	0	1	0	2	0	3 (0.38)
Total %		7 (0.90)	507 (65.1)	28 (3.59)	209 (26.83)	28 (3.59)	779 (100)

exploration of the factors impacting their employment pursuits within the host country.

Analysis process and findings

The quantitative data was analysed through descriptive analysis and a thematic approach was utilised in the coding of the qualitative responses to the survey. First order coding enabled the grouping of responses into a number of broad categories, and then these were further refined with second-order coding to link each response to a specific theme within each of the open-ended response questions.

Quantitative findings

Table 1 provides an overview of collated, valid responses to questions regarding qualification studied and the campus the respondent graduated from. The table shows that the majority of the international graduate respondents completed their degrees at the university's Australian campus. More than half of the graduates studied a single major Bachelor Degree and a further 30 percent undertook postgraduate coursework studies. No meaningful variations existed by gender.

In terms of career mobility decision making, 45.83 percent of respondents indicated they had always intended to find employment in Australia after graduating; 11.3 percent decided to find work in Australia whilst studying; and a further 26.83 percent always intended to return to home country. No notable variation existed between undergraduate and postgraduate qualification. In terms of employment status at the time of the survey, 71.27 percent stated they were currently employed, 13.81 percent were currently looking for work and 11.07 percent had part-time employment. The employment status listed does not indicate if

Table 2. Perceived barriers in achieving meaningful employment.

Perceived Barriers	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I had difficulties obtaining an interview	29.46% (99)	36.61% (123)	19.05% (64)	11.90% (40)	2.98% (10)	336
Potential employers were worried about my visa status	39.05% (132)	27.81% (94)	20.12% (68)	7.69% (26)	5.33% (18)	338
Potential employers worried about retention	10.75% (36)	24.78% (83)	41.79% (140)	16.12% (54)	6.57% (22)	335
Lack of work experience in the profession	22.36% (74)	33.53% (111)	23.26% (77)	14.20% (47)	6.65% (22)	331
Lack of Australian work experience	32.14% (108)	34.23% (115)	18.15% (61)	11.31% (38)	4.17% (14)	336
Lack of jobs to apply for in my field	18.56% (62)	22.16% (74)	29.34% (98)	21.86% (73)	8.08% (27)	334
Lack of jobs in my field in locations I wanted to live	11.75% (39)	22.59% (75)	36.45% (121)	21.99% (73)	7.23% (24)	332
My English language skills	4.50% (15)	15.02% (50)	21.92% (73)	26.13% (87)	32.43% (108)	333
Discrimination by recruiters	12.91% (43)	17.72% (59)	41.14% (137)	19.82% (66)	8.41% (28)	333
Discrimination by employers	12.91% (43)	18.62% (62)	42.94% (143)	17.72% (59)	7.81% (26)	333
Employers thought I was over qualified	6.91% (23)	12.91% (43)	39.04% (130)	29.13% (97)	12.01% (40)	333

respondents were employed in work appropriate to their degree studies. The survey responses provided a picture of international graduates who were frustrated with the inability to find meaningful employment in Australia; their educational host country. For a large number of study respondents, this impacted their ability to remain in Australia to pursue their post-study career.

Furthermore, the survey data suggests that difficulties experienced in obtaining meaningful employment was a predominant factor in decisions by the respondents to either return to their home country or re-locate to country other than their host country. The vast majority (51.62%) agreed/strongly agreed that they decided to leave Australia due to inability to find suitable employment; and a further 35.88 percent agreed that bias and/or discrimination was a factor. The survey enabled participants to identify the key factors they perceived to be the most pronounced barriers to them finding meaningful employment. The most critical barriers listed in Table 1 were employer perceptions regarding the graduate's visa status; a perceived lack of relevant work experience; discrimination and bias on behalf of employers.

Qualitative responses (n = 103) regarding barriers to finding meaningful employment echo the key barriers identified in Table 2: Difficulties obtaining an interview (66%); potential employers concerns re visa status (66.86%); lack of work experience (55.89%); and lack of Australian work experience (66.37%) were the most compelling issues. Participants also indicated that potential employers were also concerned about retention

(35.53%). Discrimination by recruiters (30.63%) and by employers (31.63%) also featured throughout the commentary by respondents.

Qualitative findings

The qualitative findings were both comprehensive and detailed regarding the participants' perceptions regarding the barriers faced in their job search endeavours, how employers could improve upon current recruitment practices as well as suggestions for ways in which the higher education sector could assist graduates with a more successful transition to the employment market.

Barriers to employment. The qualitative comments were extremely insightful regarding the frustrations experienced by the international graduates. As following quotations demonstrate, the most common perceived barrier was the visa status of international graduates (n = 31).

> "*No one wants to meet you until you have at least a residency visa*" (P66, male, Management)

> "*Employers only look for Australian candidates or Australia PR. International fresh graduates are hardly given any chance. Almost all employers mention that Australian citizenship and PR status are the key for applying [for] any job in Australia*" (P22, male, Accounting, and Finance)

During their studies, international students remain on student visas which then, dependent upon the nature of the studies (undergraduate vs postgraduate and/or discipline of study), can be amended to some form of working visa. In most cases, sponsorship by the employing organisation is required. It appears that the majority of employers advertise positions requiring Australian residency visas. If this is not an overt requirement, the narrative provided by participants suggests this is a reason for non-employment. The second major theme arising from the responses is that of perceived discriminatory behaviour in the recruitment process by employing bodies (employing organisation or recruitment agencies). Survey participant comments that suggest direct discriminatory behaviour existed in the areas of race, age, and gender discrimination (n = 24), and such behaviour was experienced across a diverse range of fields of study.

> "*No recruiter/employer wants to recruit a graduate who is not either Australian or Kiwi. That is the only true barrier I encountered*" (P19, male, Commerce)

> "*I made 37 job applications to remain in Australia, and despite finishing first in my class for 2011 I was unable to get a single interview. Only job I could get was based*

in the UK where employers are not so narrow-minded" (P63, male, Mineral Economics)

"Being judgemental as [they] think that every female candidate would underperform when it comes to field work is rather bias and unfair" (P62, female, Engineering)

Recruitment practice improvements. Survey participants were also invited to provide feedback on how Australian employers could improve their recruitment practices when recruiting international graduates from Australian universities. A smaller proportion of those participating in the survey took the opportunity to answer this question (n = 176), but there were some clear themes that reinforce the perceived barriers to meaningful employment for international graduates from this Australian university. A number of survey respondents, irrespective of ethnicity, perceived they were a good fit to the jobs they applied for, and indeed, would add value to the organisation in terms of their cross-cultural skills and experience. However, many also indicated a lack of opportunity to demonstrate their value, as potential employees, in an interview setting. A predominant number also wanted the chance to prove themselves to employers, but felt were caught in the perceived bureaucratic barriers posed by an international work visa. Participants suggested recruiters and employers need to focus on the following critical areas:

1) Understand the visa opportunities (n = 33)

"They need to stop saying 'no PR = no job'. The Australian economy heavily depends on international students (as an industry) and immigrant workers (at all professional levels)". (P34, male, Commerce)

2) Reduce recruiter bias and discrimination, and create equal employment opportunity in recruitment and selection practices (n = 36)

"Stop asking questions about gender, religion, race and sometimes even sexual orientation". (P100, male, Arts)

"Be willing to give international graduates a chance based on their capabilities, not ethnicity, gender, citizenship or religion". (P24, female, Design)

It is concerning that survey respondents reported and identified overt and direct discrimination in interview questions asked by recruiters, particularly given Australia's long-standing Equal Employment Opportunity legislation. The study also suggests that discriminatory practices were not limited to one particular ethnic group, but that it was a broad approach to anyone with a 'foreign' name or country of birth. Survey participants also demonstrated a level of frustration in not being given the opportunity to prove themselves on-the-job. Many felt that they would have a greater chance of obtaining meaningful employment if this were

provided, even if it meant casual, part-time or even unpaid work opportunities.

3) Provide international graduates with an opportunity to prove themselves on-the-job (n = 27)

"By giving international graduates a chance in getting work in Australia". (P144, male, Mass Communication)

4) Be culturally aware and acknowledge diversity (n = 12)

"Employers can look at it in a way where diversity of nationalities could be a positive effect on the office environment as well as bringing new ideas to projects. Recruiters may use this as a marketing strategy to market a potential international graduate". (P57, male, Architecture)

5) Value the university degree (n = 20)

"They need to realize that international graduates have done the same course in English that the Australian graduates in the same class did and stop marginalising them by asking for English proficiency or work experience." (P6, female, Nursing)

"They should trust the degrees given by Australian universities….I would strongly believe that Australian universities should shut down if Australian employers are not believing in their teaching and qualifications." (P16, male, Petroleum Engineering)

The final suggestion is also of concern as previous studies have suggested that the recruitment of international graduates, as compared to skilled migrants and professionals employed from overseas, have several benefits, including the quality and validity of their university degrees (Tharenou and Caulfield, 2010; Bozionelos et al., 2015). However, the participants' quotes suggest Australian employers and recruiters appear to place little value on their qualifications, even though they were gained in Australia or an Australian university branch campus.

The key commentary that was pervasive throughout the survey responses was that of the value-add of international human capital to the organisation, particularly graduates' cross-cultural and diversity skills and experience. The value of their degree as well as the university institution they graduated from was cited as beneficial to the employer. Many respondent comments and suggestions also sadly suggest a high level of frustration – even desperation, reflecting their unsuccessful journey in finding meaningful work in Australia after graduating. As indicated by a number of participants, the discriminatory barriers experienced in Australia led to them to seeking employment in other countries (not their home country) where such barriers were not experienced. This has substantial implications for Australia as a global employer of qualified and skilled labour as well as its reputation as a multicultural nation.

Table 3. University strategies for improving meaningful employment opportunities

Theme	No. of responses	Type of response
Career Fairs	26	*Job fairs specifically targeting international graduates so that employers understand the visa status issues.* (P67, male, Accounting)
Job application/interview training	47	*Interview training and learning about the working culture, social environment and etiquette.* (P65, female, Accounting) *Provide information on the laws and standards so that students can familiarise themselves before going into the workforce in Australia.* (P161, female, Education)
Work Integrated Learning embedded in course	85	*Making an internship part of the degree program and it will count towards the overall academic results.* (P25, male, Accounting) *Arrange some work experience programs and training during the course rather than focus entirely on theory.* (P37, female, Business Administration)
Employer networks/databases/ job search assistance	52	*Work out the list of employers wo are intending/interested to hire international students after they graduate. Identify students who are graduating soon and intended to stay in Australia for work. Assist students in obtaining suitable position and fulfil the employment requirements.* (P32, female, Architecture)
Provide information to employers/ students on work permits	20	*Work with local companies to show that non-Australian experience is a positive, not a negative. Foreign experience is a good thing that brings a diversity of viewpoints. Local companies seem to think that it is a bad thing.* (P136, male, Mineral Economics)

"*Some of us really are a different calibre, if only given the chance. [City name] didn't give me a chance after graduation, but London did, and bear in mind, I'm an Indonesian student. That's kind of a big deal.*" (P123, male, Marketing)

Employers also need to gain a better understanding of international work visas and to have a more flexible approach when considering international graduates. Restricting employment to those with Australian citizenship constrains and hampers the number of potential applicants in the labour pool as well as severely compromising opportunities for workplace diversity.

Higher education sector. Finally, when it came to survey questions regarding the success and role of the higher education sector in preparing these graduates for the employment market, the responses were also not particularly encouraging or complementary of university practice. An extremely high number of suggestions were received to this question (n = 232) demonstrating the need for a review of existing support programs and strategies for the transition of international students into employment after graduation. Table 3 outlines the key themes emerging from this question.

The most cited recommendation by respondents is for more work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for international students. This

theme represented 37 percent of all responses, with the vast majority specifically recommending the provision of internship opportunities within their course of study. This was followed by the suggestion for a career centre to be established which had an up-to-date database on potential employers and job vacancies, as well as job search training. Given that the university in question had a dedicated career centre, this suggests a lack of communication to students regarding their existence or role, or perhaps a lack of perceived relevance to international students. Graduates also indicated a need for specific job search/job application/interview training.

Discussion and conclusion

The present study seeks to investigate international graduates' post-study work opportunities. The research focuses specifically on the employment seeking experiences that led to the international graduate decision making routes of: returning to their home country, remaining in Australia or relocating to a third country. The international graduate respondents' employment and career goals prior to graduation were identified as well as their experiences in finding meaningful employment, appropriate to their degree, post-graduation. The research findings suggest generalisability to existing studies into the potential for discriminatory recruitment and selection decision making when applying the concept of best fit.

Best fit in employee recruitment refers to how well the candidate fits the job, the organisation and the work environment. The process utilised to decide how well a job candidate fits not only the job, but the wider organisational environment, as this study has found, has the capacity to lead to subjective and discriminatory recruitment decision making by indirectly or directly appointing candidates against organisational and recruiter cultural values and norms rather than the actual needs of the job to be performed. Best fit needs to be redefined to ensure that inherent organisational values and norms are culturally inclusive and encourage diversity, with a narrative on the potential for discrimination when recruiting to fit an existing workplace culture. The ethnic diversity of the study sample suggest that no particular ethnic group is spared from such discrimination and bias; and that a number of assumptions are made by recruiters and employers as to the ability of skilled international graduates to adapt to organisational culture and norms.

The survey findings also strongly suggest that difficulties experienced in obtaining meaningful employment was a predominant factor in decisions by the respondents, irrespective of course or field of study, to either return to their home country or re-locate to country other than

their host country. It is acknowledged that whilst there has been a body of research on international students, it has tended to focus on issues of cultural adaptation and integration, with very little on their transition to the labour market (Li, 2013). The data identified a number of key impediments to finding employment after graduation: employer perceptions regarding the graduate's visa status; a perceived lack of relevant work experience; and discrimination and bias on behalf of employers. Perceived discriminatory practices of major employers – and employment agencies – is a notable concern, not only in terms of possible breaches of EEO legislation, but in the missed opportunities of the Australian economy to benefit from this significant human capital investment. There was also a perceived need for employers and employment agencies to develop a greater understanding of visa/sponsorship mechanisms as well as cultural diversity.

The findings related to the impact of discriminatory employment practices on the linkage between the concepts of best fit and workplace diversity within the strategic human resource management framework are also worthy of further examination and research. Previous research (Bjorkland, Backstrom & Wolgast, 2012; Cable & Judge, 1997; Dietz et al., 2015) supports the correlation between focussing on best fit, particularly cultural fit, as a key selection criteria in hiring decision making and a lack of ethnic diversity amongst successful job candidates. Indeed, respondent experiences and perceptions suggest that a lack of best fit to organisational and cultural norms was the overriding reason they were unsuccessful in their job search activities. These findings make a valuable contribution to refining, or redefining the concept of best fit to ensure that existing, dominant cultural norms and behaviours are overtly omitted in 'fit' considerations in recruitment and selection decision making. The findings suggest that such existing norms and behaviours lead to not only discriminatory employment practice, but lead to a lack of workplace diversity. These findings also suggest a lack of interconnectedness between government legislation and policy and employer practice with regards to the international graduate employment market and diversity management in Australia.

The practical implications of this study are twofold. First, the overriding theme in the survey findings suggests either a lack of acknowledgement or understanding by potential employers of overseas work experience and/or cross-cultural skills possessed by international graduates. This was a pervasive finding and one that suggests an extremely Western and Anglo approach to recruitment and hiring decision making practice in Australia. Secondly, perceived discrimination and employer reluctance to recruit applicants on a work visa has implications for contemporary human resource management best practice in industry. The

rich narrative provided by the respondents not only reveals the overwhelming frustration felt, irrespective of field of study, in their journeys in securing meaningful employment, but also the specific ways in which they perceived they were discriminated against. Not only does it limit the source of potential highly educated, skilled and culturally aware employees into the labour market of the host country, it also severely compromises an organisation's ability to achieve workplace diversity; a strategic outcome necessary to compete within a highly competitive, global economy.

For employers, the study findings suggest a strong level of frustration amongst international graduates regarding their inability to finding meaningful employment in their host country. Perceived discrimination and employer reluctance to recruit applicants on a work visa has implications for contemporary human resource management best practice in industry. Not only does it limit the source of potential highly educated, skilled and culturally aware employees into the labour market of the host country, it also severely compromises an organisation's ability to achieve workplace diversity; a strategic outcome necessary to compete within a highly competitive, global economy.

Apart from being extremely critical of the hiring practices of Australian employers, the survey findings were also critical of the lack of work integrated learning opportunities within the curriculum studied. Whilst the university from which the participants were sourced had work integrated strategies and policies in place, they appeared to lack any real application within curriculum at the student level, even though there is ample evidence of the effectiveness of such strategies in equipping students with work skills necessary post-graduation. Clearly, there is a need for improved opportunities for international students to gain work experience, as well as training and development in job seeking activities. The study findings will not only assist in identifying the specific barriers to employment of qualified graduates in Australia but will also provide Australian universities with data upon which to build and enhance strategies to improve the employment opportunities of international graduates in the Australian labour market.

Limitations and directions for future research

It is acknowledged that the research design of this study has some limitations. Whilst the survey sample is sufficient to make some generalisable findings with regard to international student retrospective intentions upon graduation, the data was collected from one university. Therefore, we were unable to include a comparison analysis with other universities.

Future empirical studies might attempt such comparisons. A more comprehensive analysis across other Australian universities comparing the meaningful employment experiences and barriers of international and Australian graduates will provide further insights into any differences between the cohorts that may exist.

Furthermore, we did not consider cultural factors impacting the meaningful work seeking experiences of international graduates. Future research that explores their experiences through segmentation by cultural grouping, university branch location and course of study would greatly assist in achieving a better understanding of the inhibiting factors in host country retention along with a greater insight into the recruitment and selection experiences of international graduates intending to stay. Further research into the impact of the cultural norms and behaviours of both organisations and recruiters on the demographic profile of successful candidates would also lead to a more robust discussion on the role of the concept of best fit in limiting workplace diversity. In addition, more research on the impact of increased work integrated learning strategies in the higher and tertiary education sectors and improved employability outcomes for graduates is also critical.

Irrespective of these limitations, the present study points to a potential relationship between 'best fit' recruitment and selection practices and discriminatory practices and outcomes. Specifically, the examination of qualitative feedback from respondents provided the basis for an investigation into the level of congruence in the practical application of the concept of best fit in hiring decision making and discrimination within a strategic human resource management framework.

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