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UNDERSTANDING PLANNING STUDENTS' SELF-PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY IN AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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Planning students are entering an increasingly competitive professional labour market. To understand their self-perceived employability and identify the employability-enhancing strategies they engage in to improve their graduate employment prospects, this paper analyses survey data collected from 106 undergraduate students at a large Australian university. Three key themes are identified as important for graduate employability from the perspective of planning students: education; personal attributes and assets; and appropriate professional experience. This study finds that many respondents were critical of the extent to which they believed their university studies were positively positioned for the real world of planning and positively positioned them to succeed in the graduate employment market relative to other planning graduates. To address these limitations, respondents emphasised the importance of developing personal and professional networks with peers and engaging in skills-enhancing activities, and revealed an expectation that they may need to engage in unpaid professional work experience. However, notwithstanding these efforts to actively moderate the impact of self-perceived personal skills and experiential deficits on their employability, there was a nascent acknowledgement that despite investing significant effort into developing networks, getting professional experience, and modelling appropriate attitudes and professional traits, they may become highly employable yet still fail to secure graduate employment as a planner due to structural constraints beyond their control.

***Key words*: graduate employability; higher education; planning education; self-perceived employability.**

INTRODUCTION

Employability outcomes and performance are not uniform across disciplines, and there is high student demand for discipline-focused employability-enhancing initiatives within higher education (O'Leary, 2017). In recent years, graduate employment outcomes for planning students have been in decline due to several structural factors, including a decrease in the availability of, and greater competition for, graduate positions more generally (Grant-Smith and Mayere 2017). In response, improving graduate employability has become an increasing focus in planning and geospatial sciences education (Arrowsmith and Cartwright, 2019; Bosman and Tomerini, 2019; Dowling and Ruming, 2013; Jackson *et al*., 2017; McCarthy and Bagaeen, 2015; McLoughlin, 2012). Employability in this context is a function of objective employability (i.e., actual labour market success) and subjective or self-perceived employability (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2017) related to an "individual's perception of his or her possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment" (Vanhercke *et al*., 2014, p. 593). In the case of graduate employability, this is usually qualified by reference to employment in a specific and desired discipline and at a level commensurate with one's qualifications (Yorke, 2006; Rothwell *et al*., 2008).

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The work it takes to enhance one's employability in the tightening graduate labour market is an analytically underappreciated dimension of employability and graduate employment debates (Smith, 2010). It is therefore important that studies of graduate employability be conducted within a specific disciplinary context and that these include consideration of the employability-enhancing strategies students deploy in efforts to become more competitive applicants for graduate employment opportunities (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2016, 2018).

This paper explores the factors influencing undergraduate planning students' self-perceptions of their employability and the employability-enhancing strategies they deploy to address perceived deficits and become more competitive applicants for graduate planning employment opportunities. This paper commences with a review of the employability literature to establish key factors believed to influence employability (and employment outcomes). This is followed by an analysis of survey data collected from students enrolled in planning subjects at a large Australian university, in order to understand undergraduate planning students' self-perceptions of their employability and to identify the strategies they pursue to improve their graduate employment prospects. Finally, the paper concludes by considering the implications of these findings for planning education and identifying areas for future research.

GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Education and training were once believed to provide access to graduate employment markets, however, models of employability focussing on the individual have adopted a more nuanced approach which includes skills, experience and personal qualities and attributes as important factors in creating employability (Figure 1). The dominant employability models focus on creating employability through a mix of transferable hard and soft skills, qualifications and experience, combined with competencies such as self-appraisal and professional identity (Gedye *et al*., 2004). In such models, self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence are considered "the key" to successfully translating these into employment outcomes (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p. 281). Self-perceived employability in undergraduate students thus incorporates the self-evaluation and deployment of a wide range of human capital, including social, cultural, psychological, scholastic, and market-value capital (Donald *et al*., 2019). The ability to identify and realise career opportunities through the capacity to define oneself in a career context, alongside personal attributes, such as adaptability and emotional intelligence and the possession and deployment of social networks, have also been identified as defining attributes of employability (Fugate *et al*., 2004). Students who possess a strong sense of their career goals and a positively-oriented, yet realistic, understanding of their skills and abilities are more likely to perceive they possess high levels of employability (Bridgstock, 2009).

Despite the dominance of employability discourses in higher education, a common critique is that they tend to overemphasise individual responsibility and agency while understating the influence of social inequalities on employment outcomes (McDonald *et al*., 2020; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017). This individualised focus may work to obfuscate the role of structural (Tholen, 2013) and intersectional (Qenani *et al*., 2014) factors in influencing both employability and employment outcomes, which may have potentially damaging consequences for students (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017). Planning graduates are entering an increasingly competitive labour market that is strongly dependent on economic cycles (Grant-Smith and Mayere, 2017). Employability must therefore be understood as "relational, contextual, and, most importantly, conflictual" because employment outcomes are dependent not only on the capabilities and actions of a graduate, but also on those of other graduates and labour market aspirants (Tholen, 2013, p. 770). Literature examining planning graduate transition into work identifies professional, educational and structural issues and misfits experienced by these aspirants that challenge entry into professional roles (Willson, 2018; Taşan-Kok *et al.*, 2018). Employability is shaped not only by the actions, capabilities and self-perceptions of an individual graduate, but also by factors outside their immediate control such as the capabilities and relative advantages possessed by other graduates, alongside structural, economic and social factors (Suleman, 2018). A more holistic understanding of graduate employability must therefore recognise the contributions of both individual and contextual factors (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005), including individual attributes and behaviours and the graduate labour market (Clarke, 2018).

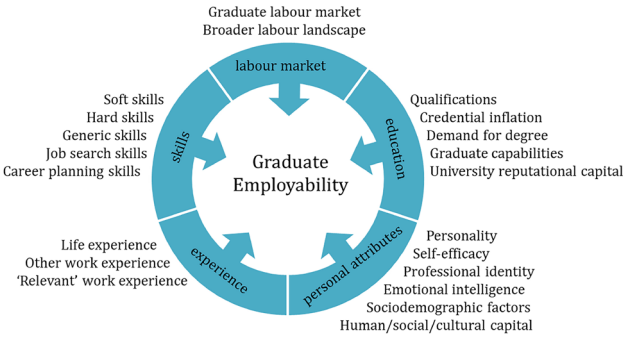

Figure 1. Key contributors to employability

This broader and more contextualised and integrated understanding of employability suggests that graduate employment outcomes are shaped by a combination of educational, structural, experiential, organizational, and personal factors (Guilbert *et al*., 2016). However, the extent to which planning students recognise this complex interplay and the potential impact on their employability remains unclear. A deeper understanding of planning students' self-perceived employability and the extent to which they recognise or attempt to mitigate the influence of factors that may impact their labour market success is required.

METHODOLOGY

Accessing student voice is imperative for understanding self-perceived employability and the personal and professional strategies adopted to enhance individual employability

(Tymon, 2013). Taşan-Kok *et al*. (2018) also identify a need to give voice to young practitioners in planning. Data was collected using a paper-based survey administered to students enrolled in planning at a large Australian university. One unit from each level of study in a four-year undergraduate planning program was selected and the survey was administered to students during a lecture for that unit. Participation was voluntary and students were able to opt out of participation by returning all surveys (completed, partially completed or not completed) to an envelope collected by a research assistant. Institutional ethics approval was granted to conduct this research. A total of 106 students completed the survey. There was a relatively even spread of respondents (54% identified as female, 44% identified as male and 2% identified as other or chose not to disclose their gender).

Informed by the work of Rothwell and Arnold (2007), Rothwell *et al.* (2008, 2009), and Smyth *et al*. (2015) on self-perceived and graduate employability, scaled questions focussed on perceptions of planning as a discipline, the reputation of their university, the state of the external labour market, and confidence in securing employment, as well as measures associated with paid and unpaid work experience. Respondents rated their agreement with a series of statements on a five-point Likert-type scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree with a neutral option to measure respondents' attitudes to each statement. Because using the mean as a measure of central tendency has been questioned for analysing ordinal data (Sullivan and Artino, 2013; Jamieson, 2004), the distribution of responses for each statement was calculated as a percentage of total responses.

Qualitative data was collected through four open-ended questions (Table 1), soliciting responses about perceptions of the required skills, barriers and other factors influencing the ability to secure paid employment as a planner, and advice to commencing students for maximising their employability and graduate employment outcomes.

Table 1. Open-ended questions

Please list the skills you think are required to get a job as a planner
In your opinion what are the most important factors in gaining graduate employment as a planner?
What do you think the barriers will be to you gaining a job as a planner?
What advice would you give to someone starting their degree so that they can maximise the chances of gaining employment in their chosen profession? Your advice can include work, study, and anything else you think is important.

As shown in Table 2, qualitative data were analysed through a phased process of thematic analysis via hand-coding (Saldaňa, 2012) using the anchor codes (Adu, 2019) of skills and attributes, barriers, and advice. A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development has been advocated for understanding social phenomena (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) within a specific context (Azungah, 2018). Because many students responded with lists and short phrase responses, these were first deductively coded using codes that emerged from the employability and graduate employment literature (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). Interpretive codes were then applied through an analytical reading of the data. A subsequent axial coding process refined the codes into three categorical themes: educational, personal, and experiential. The findings of both qualitative and quantitative analysis are reported against these themes.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Strategy

Initial inductive descriptive codes *(coding)*	**Interpretive codes *(sorting and categorisation)***	**Themes *(synthesising)***
capital (human/ social/cultural) degree/qualification discipline skills/ knowledge discipline status education/training emotional intelligence generic/soft skills hard skills/technical knowledge job search/career planning skills labour market/ competition life experience personality traits professional identity self-efficacy/self-confidence sociodemographic factors university status work experience (relevant) work experience (other)	academic performance degree/discipline reputation/status graduate labour market industry/ professional experience job seeking/career planning skills non-professional work experience personal qualities/ attributes social capital university reputation/status	Educational Personal Experiential

THE PERCEIVED INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL FACTORS ON EMPLOYABILITY

The demand for urban and regional planners has been stable and is projected to continue to grow over the next five years (JobOutlook, 2019). For occupations like planning, participation in formal education is an increasing expectation to access labour markets; indeed, the latest Australian data reports that 100% of urban and regional planners possess either a bachelor-level degree (66%) or postgraduate qualification (34%) (JobOutlook, 2019). As a result, by virtue of their enrolment in and expected completion of a planning degree, most respondents perceive themselves as meeting the educational requirements for securing employment as a planner. Possession of a degree is not a guarantee of labour market success because formal qualifications have become "declining currencies" (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 15) due to the massification of higher education, making it more difficult for employers to use the possession of credentials alone as a selection tool (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013; Tomlinson, 2008). Additional credentials can be required, which creates difficulties for graduate planners. For example, the national professional body, Planning Institute of Australia, promotes

Registered Planner accreditation based on five years of experience, and continuing professional development (Buzsko, 2017). Additionally, according to JobOutlook (2019), most employers sought at least five years of experience despite graduates being available for work. Table 3 reports on the perceived influence of three key educational factors on employability: academic performance, university reputation, and disciplinary status.

majority agree that possession of the degree alone is not enough to secure employment. A compensatory strategy was the strategic decision to offer employers a broader skills-set developed through taking '*a subject that teaches you to use programs such as InDesign, Photoshop and Illustrator*'. Such an approach was seen to provide a competitive advantage by possessing more than the standard planning skills set as a result of tailoring their education through the selection of

Table 3. Perceptions of the contribution of educational factors to graduate employability (%)

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
Academic performance					
A degree/qualification is important in gaining graduate employment as a planner	55.7	40.6	2.8	0	0
Having a degree is not enough to get a good job	39.6	34.0	14.2	8.5	3.8
Academic performance is important in gaining graduate employment as a planner	18.9	59.4	15.1	6.6	0.0
I achieve high grades in relation to my studies	27.6	59.0	11.4	1.9	0.0
I regard my academic work as my top priority	24.5	56.6	12.3	6.6	0.0
University reputation					
University attended is important in gaining graduate employment	22.6	51.9	19.8	4.7	0.0
My university has an outstanding reputation in my field of study	25.7	52.4	21.0	1.0	0.0
The status of my university is a significant asset to me in job seeking	17.9	61.3	18.9	1.9	0.0
Employers are eager to employ graduates from my university	15.2	59.0	21.0	4.8	0.0
Employers target my university to recruit individuals from my subject area	8.6	43.8	41.9	5.7	0.0
Disciplinary status of planning					
A lot more people apply for my degree than there are places available	4.8	12.5	51.9	21.2	9.6
My degree leads to a specific career perceived as highly desirable	8.6	45.7	38.1	5.7	1.9
Being a planning student is important to me	38.1	46.7	12.4	1.9	1.0
I would rather NOT tell people that I am a planning student	0.0	2.8	14.2	19.8	63.2
Planning students have a lot to be proud of	22.6	51.9	22.6	2.8	0.0
I have a lot of respect for students in my field of study	27.4	55.7	14.2	2.8	0.0
Planning ranks highly in terms of social status	2.9	21.0	60.0	12.4	2.9

A way of mitigating the perceived declining value of formal qualifications is through high levels of academic performance. A sizeable proportion of respondents agree that academic performance is important in gaining graduate employment. This emphasis on the importance of good grades is perhaps connected to its relationship with the virtue of '*studying hard*', whereby achieving good grades could be understood as a proxy for demonstrating a strong work ethic, performance potential and reliability to potential employers. Grades can thus be perceived as both an indicator of academic performance and of possession of the personal qualities that an employer may value, as the non-planning electives, in order to exceed workplace needs and expectations for planning graduates.

The classed and subjective nature of the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2012) means that factors outside the control of the students influence the value of their education and qualifications (Qenani *et al*., 2014). This includes the university's reputation (Pitan and Muller, 2019). The majority of planning students surveyed agree that the reputation of the university attended plays a significant role in their employability. Although planning students in this sample agreed their specific university conferred reputational advantage and status (which they believe

to be relatively high), they also indicated a high rate of neutrality (or uncertainty) (42%) about whether employers specifically target graduates of their university, compared to 52% agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was the case. This is also reflected in student comments, which state that other universities offering planning programs in the local area are perceived as having better industry links. Competition between planning students and the reputational advantage conferred to planning students of elite universities was noted and based on '*connection to top institutions compared to [my university]*'. It, therefore, appears that there may be a disconnect between the importance that students place on academic reputation, particularly institutional reputation, and the relative lack of importance that employers have been found to place on this when hiring graduates (Finch *et al*., 2013). Based on interviews with employers and recruiters, Finch *et al*. (2013) found that when hiring new graduates the highest emphasis is placed on the possession of soft skills, and the lowest on the academic reputation in terms of university attended, program completed and individual academic performance (grade point average). However, it is also important to note that attendance at an elite university may also confer unobservable attitudes such as self-confidence and self-efficacy (Drydakis, 2015), as well as access to professional networks.

Respondents showed signs of a nascent professional identity, with a strong level of agreement that being a planning student is important to them. However, they are more ambivalent regarding the status of planning as a profession and the competitiveness of entry into the degree, with more than half neither agreeing nor disagreeing that more people apply for the degree than there are places available, and a further 30% of respondents disagreeing and strongly disagreeing that it is competitive. Despite this, the majority of respondents indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they would rather not tell other people they are a planning student. Indeed, a sizeable majority agree or strongly agree that planning students have a lot to be proud of, and express respect for other planning students. These responses indicate that planning students may be seeking a career in planning for reasons other than social status and that the profession remains a source of professional or social identity.

TRANSLATING EMPLOYABILITY INTO EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES THROUGH PERSONAL ASSETS

Individual traits and disposition, such as personality and personal adaptability (Clarke, 2018; Fugate and Kinicki, 2008), combined with self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence are believed to be important personal assets in self-assessments of employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). Table 4 reports respondents' self-perceived employability alongside a self-assessment of their capacity to translate these into employment outcomes against three measures: personal attributes and qualities; job-seeking abilities; and social capital.

Planning students appear to be most confident that they possess the requisite personal qualities and attributes and to 'sell' these to potential employers. However, this level of confidence is only marginally strong. They expressed the least confidence in their possession of the requisite professional knowledge to be competitive on the planning job market and their ability to convincingly communicate this to potential employers. This was perhaps also connected to their lower levels of confidence in their ability to perform well in recruitment activities. An example of this is anticipated or experienced difficulties in communicating their value to planning employers, with one respondent commenting, '*my barrier is selling myself, my qualities and my skills. I think I am a great student and professional but I struggle to communicate that*'. However, even students who possessed a greater level of confidence in their ability to do so noted an implicit tension in '*being able to be confident and reasonable with abilities without coming across as arrogant or overly confident*'. This tension suggests graduates are endeavouring to fit into employment cultures they perceive as expecting them to stand out but not too much.

Bridgstock (2009, p. 31) suggests that the ability to "proactivity navigate the world of work and self-manage the career building process" is an essential component of employability. It is of concern therefore that another area where planning students appeared to be lacking confidence was concerning their broader job-seeking abilities, with the lowest level of confidence across all categories being the ability to easily find out about planning job opportunities. Central to this ability is identity work, which supports "learning about growth sectors, about demands for new skills and how to acquire them, understanding how to access pathways to 'good' jobs, finding jobs and holding onto them" (Smith, 2010, p. 284). However, exercising this identity work also requires high levels of social and cultural capital (Smith, 2010), which students seek to develop through networks. Professional networks are perceived by respondents as being more influential than personal networks in shaping employability, but the reality is that there is often little difference between these in the early stages of a career in planning, because students seek to turn to their advantage the professional networks of their friends, families, lecturers and tutors. The strategic use of these relationships was clearly articulated by one respondent, who advised others they should attend *'networking events [and] make friends/connections with your cohort, those relationships will be important later in life!'*. This emphasis on cultivating a professional persona and connections early on was also evident in advice to establish a professional social media presence and to develop (and promote) stand-out qualities that set them apart, by communicating both suitability and uniqueness to create a competitive edge.

EMPHASISING THE EXPERIENTIAL ELEMENT OF EMPLOYABILITY

Brown *et al*. (2003) argue that, ultimately, employability is about the state of demand for labour and the amount of competition from other applicants rather than the inherent personal and educational characteristics of the individual alone. Table 5 reports planning students' assessments of the contribution of these factors to their employability.

With employment prospects and demand for graduates, as indicative of labour market dynamics, planning students express significant uncertainty about their graduate

Table 4. Self-assessed influence of personal assets on employability (%

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
Personal attributes and qualities					
Personal qualities are important in gaining graduate employment	53.8	34.9	11.3	0.0	0.0
I am confident I have the personal qualities and attitudes required	35.2	50.5	13.3	1.0	0.0
The skills and abilities I possess are what employers are looking for	14.6	60.2	21.4	2.9	0.0
I feel I could get any job if my skills and experience are reasonably relevant	21.9	50.5	16.2	10.5	1.0
I am confident I have the skills required to secure graduate employment as a planner	21.0	62.9	12.4	2.9	1.0
I am confident I have the professional knowledge required to secure graduate employment as a planner	14.3	53.3	25.7	6.7	0
Job-seeking abilities					
I can easily find out about job opportunities in my chosen field	11.3	43.4	19.8	21.7	3.8
I am generally confident of success in job interviews and selection events	11.4	42.9	30.5	13.3	1.9
I am confident I can sell my personal qualities and attributes to a potential employer	26.7	47.6	21.0	4.8	0.0
I am confident I can sell my skills to a potential employer	18.1	54.3	18.1	9.5	0.0
I am confident I can sell my professional knowledge to a potential employer	14.3	42.9	36.2	6.7	0.0
Social capital					
Personal networks are important for gaining graduate employment as a planner	43.4	47.2	9.4	0.0	0.0
Professional networks are important for gaining graduate employment as a planner	61.3	34.9	3.8	0.0	0.0
Professional memberships are important for gaining graduate employment as a planner	8.6	48.6	31.4	10.5	1.0

Table 5. Perceptions of the contribution of labour market and experience to graduate employability (%)

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
Labour market					
There are plenty of job vacancies in the geographical area where I am looking	2.8	15.1	49.1	25.5	7.5
There is generally strong demand for graduates at present	3.8	23.8	45.7	24.8	1.9
Planners are in high demand in the labour market	3.8	42.5	44.3	9.4	0.0
Luck is important in gaining graduate employment as a planner	19.8	44.3	20.8	8.5	6.6
Industry experience					
Prior professional work experience is essential to getting a good job once you graduate	50.9	38.5	8.5	4.7	0.0
Employers prefer to employ graduates with relevant professional work experience	58.5	33.0	8.5	0.0	0.0
Paid work experience prior to graduating is common in my chosen profession	9.5	25.7	45.7	17.1	1.9
Unpaid work experience is common in my chosen profession	37.1	29.5	25.7	6.7	1.0
No one should have to work for free	27.4	24.5	30.2	16.0	0.9
Everyone should expect to have to do some unpaid work at the beginning of their career	23.6	42.5	20.8	10.4	2.8
Gaining professional experience is more important than getting paid	40.6	37.7	16.0	4.7	0.9
I will probably need to do some unpaid work experience to get a job in my chosen profession	51.9	35.8	7.5	3.8	0.9
Non-professional work experience					
Prior non-professional work experience is important in gaining graduate employment as a planner	19.8	38.7	28.3	7.5	4.7
Employers value the skills gain through non-professional jobs such as working in a supermarket or fast-food restaurant	7.5	43.4	26.4	17.9	4.7

employment prospects. Many are unsure about the labour market they will enter into or the opportunities available to them. Fewer than half of the respondents agreed that there is a high demand for planners and believe this demand is even weaker for graduates. This recognition of the objectively worsening graduate employment outcomes for planning students and local labour market shrinkage in Australia (Grant-Smith and Mayere, 2017) is combined with acknowledgement that labour markets are also increasingly competitive as the pool of graduate job opportunities is limited and unevenly geographically distributed. They are most pessimistic about the availability of planning job vacancies in the local area (south-east Queensland), which could be connected to the intense competition for jobs in a region where there are six universities across eight campuses offering undergraduate planning degrees, graduating over 100 planners each year. This should be understood in the context of the broader planning labour market, in which in 2019 there were only 14,300 planners employed in the whole of Australia (ABS, 2020).

Within our sample, there was a strong level of agreement that employers prefer employing graduates with relevant professional work experience, and within this crowded labour market, these expectations are largely realized. This expectation for the possession of experience before gaining paid employment was articulated by one student who said *'graduate jobs these days ask for two years' experience [but] how do you get that whilst studying full time?'.* It is important to note that in this context, work experience specifically refers to relevant industry experience. Graduating students enter the labour market with significantly less industry experience than the two years identified by a student and five years favoured by employers (JobOutlook, 2019), with 19 of 44 final year student respondents achieving 60 or more days' industry experience, and a further 11 students indicating they had no industry experience. Although most of the students in the sample had non-professional work experience, they did not believe that planning employers valued the skills gained through non-professional work experience, such as working in the retail or hospitality industries. This view is supported by interviews conducted by Grant-Smith and McDonald (2016, 2018), who found that many planning students had experienced limited success translating their non-professional work experience into a commodity that appealed to planning employers.

To redress these employer work experience expectations and enhance student employability, increasing numbers of planning courses have incorporated experiential learning into their programs (Baldwin and Rosier, 2017; Brooks *et al*., 2002). The current emphasis on employability as an individual responsibility (Sin *et al*., 2016) elevates student behaviour, attitudes and skills as the dominant factor in determining employment outcomes, and positions employability as a quality the graduate must work to cultivate in order to achieve graduate employment. In recent years, this has involved an increasing focus on the importance of participation in pre-graduation professional work experience as a key employability-enhancing strategy (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2016). Work-integrated learning activities such as a planning practicum enjoy high levels of institutional and student support (Coiacetto, 2004; Freestone *et al*., 2006). In addition to formal work-integrated learning opportunities provided through practicum placements, students are also choosing to engage in a range of paid and unpaid professional work experience activities to enhance their employability (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2016). Indeed, work experience, whether paid or unpaid, is believed not only to enhance personal capital, but to also compensate for differences in reputational capital between universities (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2018).

Perhaps as a direct result of this push, some of the planning students in our sample emphasised the absence of sufficient experience being a factor against which their employability would be judged. This resulted in a tension where students overwhelmingly advocated the need for professional work experience, but also noted that while unpaid work experience opportunities are somewhat common in planning, being paid for this experience was less common: *'take the time and make the effort to get work experience. If it's unpaid, yes it sucks but you need to suck it up. Unfortunately, students who are green in the field are essentially not worth much'.*

While more than half of the planning students surveyed agreed that no one should have to work for free, most agreed that they would probably need to undertake some unpaid work experience to gain professional employment and agreed that gaining experience was more important than getting paid. Indeed, some students suggested that gaining professional work experience should even be prioritised over study, based on the belief that experience is the defining factor in securing graduate employment as a planner: *'Quite often the professional industry no longer looks towards tertiary qualifications. When applying for jobs 9/10 employers rejected my application due to lack of industry experience. I believe practical and loggable hours is seen as more desired rather than a degree of qualification'.*

DISCUSSION

Planning students perceive and construct employability in a context that is unclear to them, and in which they perceive graduates and geographic areas to be disadvantaged, forming their perceptions and expectations as they interact with and encounter changing contexts. Planning students assert agency in their responses to demonstrate their worth as integral to employability, even though they are uncertain about the labour market; they identify and are attentive to where they exert agency and act per their employability-enhancing strategies. This includes not only how hard they work in their studies and how they present to prospective employers, but also in the shaping of strategies to compensate for or diminish perceived deficits. As such, they are constructing their employability in response to their subjective experiences and perceptions of their education and employment prospects.

The all-pervasive focus on employability requires students to "construct and continuously reconstruct their 'self' to render them attractive on the labour market" (Precarious Workers Brigade, 2017, p. 8). This was evident in this research, where planning students' employability-enhancing strategies reflect a subjective and interpretive attempt to make sense

of their fit in the labour market in relation to others. Through these strategies, students seek to position themselves as graduate planners, yet they do so with some uncertainty about a changing employment landscape and a relatively low level of working knowledge of the industry they seek to enter. Facilitating this transition requires significant self-invention and self-improvement through the acquisition of professional work experience, evidence of disciplinary skills and knowledge through educational qualifications, and the demonstration of selective personality traits to gain a positional advantage. This self-interrogation process results in planning students cataloguing their perceived deficits and attempting to enact employability-enhancing strategies to overcome them.

Students' responses reveal tensions between 'deficits' – such as lack of professional networks or specific skills – and their exertion of agency to address those deficits. The relationship between perceived deficits and doubt can be overwhelming (Willson, 2018). However, the catalogue of assets and deficits presented in Figure 2 suggests that respondents have taken on the task of enhancing their graduate employability and are somewhat satisfied with the results. However, the assessment would also suggest that planning students are aware of structural factors which impact their employability, such as the graduate labour market. There are also deficits that students cannot remedy alone, and which planning education may have a role in addressing as societal challenges mount and provoke transformative industry responses (Frank and da Rosa Pires, 2021). For example, career planning and management skills could be better embedded in planning education, particularly in courses where participation in an industry-based practicum is an expectation. Career planning for planners, as Willson (2018) describes, should be reflective and adaptive. In the curriculum, this could focus on assisting planning students to 'translate' for an industry audience the value that their non-professional work experience brings to planning work. Greater attention could also be paid to increasing students' awareness of their professional knowledge, which may simply require a more explicit connection to be drawn between real-world applications and what they have learnt in class, rather than simply offering more and longer unpaid work experience.

Given their self-reported lack of real-world experience and reliance on seeking advice from and accessing the professional contacts provided by academic staff, future research should consider the extent to which planning students make judgements about employability and the employment labour market based on their own experiences of job seeking or feedback from peers (including those who have graduated before them) and academic staff, which students may have internalised as 'fact'. We concur with Johnston (2003) that further research is required which compares the extent to which students' self-perceived employability is realised in their postgraduate employment, that is, there is a need to engage with graduates regarding their actual employment experiences and outcomes rather than their pre-graduation perceptions alone. As this research was undertaken before the outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing shocks experienced by the higher education sector, the labour market and the economy more generally, it is possible that student perceptions of their employability may have further deteriorated. However, it is also possible that economic recovery programs built on construction and infrastructure may potentially result in more positive conditions for planning graduates. The question remains whether planning education is sufficient to meet the changing and complex societal challenges thrown up by the pandemic, and graduates' capacity to respond to these (Frank and da Rosa Pires, 2021). As such, further research into student and graduate perceptions of employability during such volatile conditions is warranted. In this context, a potentially fruitful area of inquiry is in relation to developing a deeper understanding of students' intentions to pursue a career in planning in relation to both professional identity and self-interest dimensions (Tsakissiris and Grant-Smith, 2021). Further, as planning is not a wholly vocationally-oriented degree, another potentially productive line of inquiry surrounds the transferability of planning education to other occupational outcomes.

Figure 2. Self-identified assets and deficits of planning students in the context of graduate employabilty

Planning students are perhaps accurate in their assessment that employers have a high level of expectation that graduates will have most of the soft skills and attributes required to perform a role at the time of appointment, but contrary to the planning students' expectations, Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) find that employers are prepared to wait for up to a year for some technical skills to develop. Of course, Hinchcliffe and Jolly are quick to point out that this does not mean that employers necessarily rate soft skills as more important than hard skills, but rather that they are perhaps more influential in initial hiring decisions for graduate roles. Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) similarly found that the possession of soft skills, such as written communication and interpersonal skills, was rated more highly than work experience, and that non-professional work experience, such as 'vacation jobs', were valued as they demonstrated that capacity and opportunity to exercise soft skills in a work environment. Of course, this would need to be tested

with planning employers, but it may suggest that there has been an overemphasis on professional work experience, particularly unpaid work, as an employability-enhancing activity. However, given the current emphasis by students, employers and institutions on the importance of professional work experience, much of which could be expected to be unpaid, it is imperative that planning education include information about students' rights and responsibilities as members of the planning workforce (Grant-Smith and McDonald, 2016).

Recent research has explored the impact of sociodemographic factors on employability (e.g., see O'Leary, 2021). Future research should explore the impact of intersectional factors such as gender, ethnicity and class on the self-perceived employability of planning graduates. Finally, administering this survey to planning students from other universities or national contexts could contribute to a more general understanding of the self-perceived employability of planning students and provide the opportunity to tease out differences between different national contexts and educational regimes.

CONCLUSION

Despite regarding their formal education as an essential element of graduate employability, planning students perceive the possession of professional experience as being key to translating that employability into graduate employment, and are largely resigned to undertaking extended periods of unpaid work to positively position themselves in the employment market relative to other planning graduates. The extent to which this increasing focus on facilitating more and longer work-integrated learning experiences and unpaid work experience may be a contributory factor in the loss of paid graduate opportunities by conditioning both employers and graduates to expect that unpaid work is the only path to paid employment is unclear (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017). But what is clear in this research is a troubling undercurrent of student commentary that without this work they were '*not worth much*'. Consequently, perceptions of their employability are significantly weighted by self-assessments of deficits. This is concerning given the importance of self-confidence in employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007).

The very concept of employability has been subject to debate, especially around the notion of achieving higher levels of employability for graduates without focussing on structural barriers to positive graduate employment outcomes (Tholen, 2013). Students, educators and employers need to get past the idea that a 'positive' attitude (Andrews and Russell, 2012) combined with participation in unpaid work experience will somehow launch graduates into employment (Jackson *et al*., 2017). Indeed, Brown *et al*. (2004) have noted that graduates can be highly employable but remain unable to secure gainful employment in their desired career. Certainly, it is the job of planning education to ensure that its graduates possess the skills to pursue multiple career paths, but perhaps it must also recognise its responsibilities in educating the employers of planning graduates to have realistic expectations about what to expect in and from a graduate, rather than placing an unachievable employability burden on its students.

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