

From the outside looking in: A study of Australian employers' perceptions of graduates from outdoor education degree programs.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study conducted in 2006-07 exploring the perspectives that some Australian employers have of graduates from an outdoor education degree program. Similar studies have been conducted in the US and the UK; however no such study has been conducted in Australia. This study clarifies some of the tensions that exist in the Australian outdoor education field regarding how employers perceive prospective employees with academic degrees. The study assumed a threefold approach to building knowledge by exploring: 1) The characteristics outdoor education employers sought in prospective employees, 2) The qualities Australian employers in the outdoor profession expect in an OE graduate, and 3) The perceptions employers have of OE graduates currently working in the profession. Findings suggest that personal attributes and experience were the key characteristics that employers sought in outdoor education staff. A degree was considered to be beneficial when recruiting and selecting employees, but only in the context of a broader matrix of other skills. Some employers expressed concerns about inconsistencies between graduates, inaccurate perceptions of graduate's personal skill levels, and arrogance amongst some graduates.

Introduction

Currently in Australia there are a number of pathways that exist to provide entry into the outdoor profession, but it is not always clear which pathway will produce the best employees. Where do graduates from outdoor education degrees fit within the spectrum of employment positions and qualifications that exist within the Australian outdoor profession? The outdoor profession spans a range of overlapping fields including outdoor education, outdoor recreation, adventure therapy, and organisational/management corporate development (Mann, 2005a). There are claims by a number of Australian universities that their graduates are suited to work across the outdoor profession but can this claim be substantiated? There is no conclusive evidence that graduates of undergraduate courses within Australia meet, or fail to meet, employers' needs. If a degree does not give the graduate a significant advantage in gaining employment comparable to a shorter course is it worth the time and money involved?

This paper will describe the findings of a study conducted in 2006-07 that explored the perspectives of Australian employers on the value of outdoor education (OE) academic degrees. These findings will be of interest to a number of groups including: OE graduates hoping to enhance their employment prospects; academics in their construction and articulation of degree courses; and employers looking for employees who match vocational needs for both today and the future. In the sections that follow, I will

review the relevant literature and describe the methods used to conduct the study. I will then summarise the findings and provide some discussion before drawing conclusions.

What makes a good outdoor education degree?

It's fair to conclude that some people must think academic degrees have an important role in the preparation of outdoor educators; otherwise we would not have the current OE degrees that exist in Australia and around the world. According to some literature, there are three functions that academic OE degrees fulfil. First, they develop a depth of knowledge that serves as a foundation for effective practice (Barnes 2004; Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Higgins & Morgan, 1999; Maningas & Simpson, 2003). Second, academic degrees serve to legitimise the field through the development of a body of knowledge specific to the OE profession and the ability to expound the nature of that profession to others (Dingle, 2005; Guthrie, 2001; Higgins & Morgan, 1999; Martin, 2001; Martin, 1998). Third, academic degrees aim to produce practitioners that "have the historical and theoretical foundation to be able to articulate what we do, why we do it, and how our work fills a need not met by more traditional schooling" (Plaut, 2001, p. 138).

Other authors have questioned the efficacy of OE degree programs and there has been considerable debate in both Australia and internationally regarding the benefits that a degree gives to a person looking for

work in the outdoor profession (Maningas & Simpson, 2003; Mann, 2005b; Medina, 2001; Plaut, 2001). The above research indicated that employers were more interested in other characteristics and that employment did not hinge on the possession of a degree. Some of the characteristics the authors emphasised included: personal attributes (motivation and initiative), experience, professional certifications, workshops and conference attendance, computer literacy, and administration skills (Everard, 1997; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Medina, 2001; Thomas & Nicita, 2003).

Important content in an outdoor education degree

Empirical research has established that an OE degree requires an inclusive blend of theoretical material and practical experiences, with sufficient time to ensure the development of judgement to use these theories and skills (Barnes, 2004; Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Sugerman, 1998). However, there is some tension concerning the balance of theory and practical skills and experience gained during a degree (Barnes, 2004; Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Priest & Gass, 1999).

In terms of essential content, employers indicated that first aid training was important along with leadership, risk management, and group facilitation (Barnes, 2004; Guthrie, 2001; Sugerman, 1998; Zwaagstra, 2001). In Little and Cosgriff's (2005) analysis of the University of Waikato's outdoor education degree, they stated that due to time restrictions and other limitations they cannot produce graduates that are immediately employable as outdoor leaders. However, they can provide an essential grounding in skills and theory to mark their progression into the outdoor profession.

Research on employers' perceptions of OE degrees has identified other limitations including: disparity between curricula and naming across all degrees (Sugerman, 1998), the lack of a coherent articulation as to the skills taught and comparable levels of competency versus other certifications (Guthrie, 2001; Medina, 2001), financial restrictions and their impact on group size, resources and trip destinations (Higgins & Morgan, 1999), and the impact of geographical location and philosophical orientation on degree coherence (Little & Cosgriff, 2005; Sugerman, 1998). The fact that some degrees claim that their graduates are capable of working in a variety of overlapping fields across the profession may contribute to some of the confusion expressed by employers. It should be noted that employers are one of many stakeholders in the development and delivery of academic courses and their opinions need to be considered in the context of other stakeholders. For example, according to a liberal ideology, common in many academic institutions, the

goals of a degree program may be more focussed on developing people than servicing the needs of industry (Martin 1998).

Employer's perceptions of outdoor education graduates

In his research on OE degrees, Barnes (2004) surveyed 160 employers in England and asked them what qualities they expect in an OE or outdoor leadership degree graduate? The employers' rankings from 1-10 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The 10 most important characteristics required in an outdoor leader in the United Kingdom (Barnes, 2004).

Ranking	Skill Definition
1	Outdoor activity awards/ skills
2	Personal attributes
3	Experience
4	Group working skills
5	Communication skills
6	Knowledge and understanding
7	Problem solving skills
8	Project management skills
9	Information technology skills
10	Academic awards/ skills

Barnes (2004) described the low rating of academic degrees by employers as disturbing because the academic degrees were clearly failing to communicate the content of their programs, which typically address many of the items ranked higher in the list. This poor communication from the universities appears to be limiting the recognition that graduates get for their degrees. If this is true, then it's clear that universities in the UK at least, need to improve the explanation of their degree content beyond testamurs and statements of attainment to include the connections made between many of the skills indicated above and how students develop these skills while undertaking degrees. This may improve employers' understanding of degrees and positively shape their perceptions of academic awards.

Thomas and Nicita (2003), Barnes (2004), and Gassner (2002) all reinforced the importance of the personal attributes of motivation, enthusiasm, ambition, maturity, and commitment in prospective employees. Gassner (2002) added that attitude is

arguably the biggest factor in a person's effectiveness as an employee. In a qualitative study of employers involved with the USA-based Association for Experiential Education, Maningas and Simpson (2003) found that over half of the respondents preferred employees to have some sort of college degree. In addition to this, staffing managers' preferred to hire someone with solid soft skills rather than specific hard skills. Unlike Barnes' (2004) UK study, Garvey and Gass (1999) found that in the USA applicants without a degree were virtually disqualified from gaining employment in OE work. This was because employers felt a degree identified certain skills that were not in evidence in non-degree holders, including a method for learning to understand the broad implications of the field and the ability to adapt to dynamic work environments.

In the UK, Barnes (2004) found that employers' concerns about graduates included their lack of practical and hands-on knowledge and experience, arrogance amongst graduates because they possess a degree, and inaccurate perceptions of their own abilities. The literature also described a tension for employers between their needs and wants. Barnes (2004), Mann (2005b), and Garvey and Gass (1999) found a disparity in employers' desire for certain skills based on their needs for today versus the skills, theory and knowledge that employers want in their employees for the future. The needs are typically specific activity competencies to satisfy the requirements of the programs employers are offering, for example, rock climbing or abseiling skills. The wants typically include knowledge of the underpinning philosophy of why organisations conduct these activities and the ability to facilitate these activities to meet educational aims.

In light of this review of the literature, the study described in this paper sought to address some general and specific issues related to employer perceptions of graduates in Australia. The study explored: 1) The characteristics outdoor education employers sought in prospective employees, 2) The qualities Australian employers in the outdoor profession expect in an OE graduate, and 3) The perceptions employers have of OE graduates currently working in the profession. This study also sought to establish if the issues with outdoor education graduates described in the UK and USA also existed in Australia. Consequently, do aspects of outdoor education programs in Australia need to be improved? This paper will also clarify how the different training and education pathways for outdoor educators in Australia are perceived by Australian employers. Furthermore, the study sought to build knowledge about the professional frameworks that exist in Australia for the employment, credentialing and remuneration of outdoor education employees.

Research methods

In undertaking this study I used a pragmatic approach to develop knowledge relevant to the foci. A pragmatic approach identifies a connection between practical consequences of actions and real effect, and specifically the way meaning and truth develop (Marshall & Rossaman, 2006). I identified with this approach, especially when linked with the concept of formal pragmatics which highlights establishing the necessary conditions required for reaching understanding through communication (Habermas, Lenhardt, & Nichol森, 1990). To put this into the context of my study, the aim was to build links through communication between graduates, academics, employers and the outdoor profession to foster understanding, communication, consensus and good will. It was not my intent to formulate theory, but rather to instigate debate, action and the formulation of new approaches.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through an open-ended survey questionnaire that was emailed to employers in the outdoor profession of Australia. The responses provided information about the broad range of areas that graduates were employed, . employers' perceptions of training pathways, and the values and beliefs underpinning those perceptions. I specifically attempted to include employers from the four main sectors of the outdoor profession: outdoor education, outdoor recreation, adventure therapy, and organisational/management corporate development (Mann, 2005a). The employers in these four sectors were chosen because they were able to provide information relevant to the study foci because of their in-depth experience of employing and working with outdoor educators (Patton, 1990). Three strategies were used to solicit participants: I recruited participants from state OE conferences where I delivered presentations on my literature review; I called for participants in state based OE/ recreation journals, websites and newsletters; and I accessed employer databases for practicum placement options held by the La Trobe University, Centre for Excellence in Outdoor and Environmental Education.

Of the 150 questionnaires emailed to prospective employers, 32 valid questionnaires were returned. The respondents held positions of senior responsibility within their organisations and each Australian state and territory was represented, although a representative sample of Australia was not sought. The distribution of program types offered by employers' organisations is shown in Table 2, and school-based OE programs were the dominant type of program offered even though the majority of the organisations were not schools and did not employ teachers to conduct their programs.

Table 2: Programs offered by the employers' organisations

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

The employers who responded worked in a range of organisations: from the very small (1) to the very large (275). At the time, the organisations collectively employed 850 employees in full time, part time or sessional capacities with approximately half of the employees in full-time positions. The employers were asked about the prevalence of tertiary outdoor education qualifications held by employees within their organisations. Thirty of the employers indicated that at least one if not more of their current staff had an outdoor education tertiary qualification of some description. Across the organisations represented over half of the employees had a tertiary degree or diploma, although the organisations with a higher percentage of employees with formal qualifications tended to be small organisations. In some of these school-based organisations a tertiary qualification is a mandatory requirement for employment. Hence, there was a blend of employees from a range of training backgrounds working in the organisations represented in this research. Evidently, the respondents had the opportunity to assess a broad range of outdoor educators and to be clear about the characteristics and traits they sought in new outdoor educators.

Data analysis

The analysis of data was conducted in stages, using techniques suited to my pragmatic research philosophy (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). First, I conducted data reduction (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003), which allowed for the questions associated with the quantitative elements to be incorporated into descriptive statistics related to distribution, averages, aggregates, and summations of trends. I performed data transformation by linking any comments made in relation to these questions by participants with connected themes in the qualitative questions (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003).

The data reduction was conducted by reducing the dimensionality of the data through exploratory thematic analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003). The data were coded, based upon these emergent themes, then categorised and entered into a database, with a key characteristic of each theme adopted as a title. Selected quotations from participants were linked with each category, which helped to provide a clear description of the participant's thoughts on the issue. Analysis also sought to clearly represent the range of responses. Quantitative and qualitative data were then cross-referenced to establish links between separate sections of the questionnaire and to allow for interpretation of results relative to the themes identified in the literature review.

I used a number of approaches to establish the trustworthiness of the data. One of the key approaches was the use of thick description (Mertens, 2005), which involves the extensive utilisation of participant's own words in describing a central theme or finding. This practice also allows the reader to determine the transferability of the findings to other contexts with which they are familiar. Using the participants' quotes and personal inferences also adds authenticity to the findings described. I also used member checking, which according to Mertens (2005) builds the credibility of the findings by verifying with the respondents my interpretations of their data. Participants were contacted once analysis of the initial data was completed, to verify the themes and interpretations that I had established. In this process, two respondents did clarify their position on certain topics to enhance my interpretation of their data. Other methods used to build trustworthiness included an audit trail and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mertens, 2005).

Limitations to the research

There are a number of limitations within the study. The system of soliciting participants for this research may have created some bias towards some areas of the employment sector. Those choosing to be involved may have had either strong positive or negative experiences employing OE graduates and as such wished to make their opinions heard. Thirty-two valid questionnaires were returned, a return rate of 21.3%. This low response rate is not considered to be a big issue because a representative sample was not sought and those who participated have provided a valid perspective worthy of serious consideration.

My own position as a graduate of an OE degree program needs to be recognised as a potential source of bias in the study. However, I have utilised a number of tests for trustworthiness to ensure any personal bias was identified and eliminated to ensure my views did not distort my interpretations in the study (Mertens, 2005). Finally, it is worth noting that employers are only one of the key stakeholders concerning OE degrees and while employers' perceptions are important there are other important stakeholders who may hold different views. For example, current students, past graduates, professional associations including the state-based institutes for teaching, and academics in tertiary education may all have different, but legitimate, perspectives.

Findings and discussion

The findings and discussion in this section will be presented for each of the research questions identified earlier. I will discuss some of the key connections that can be made between the literature review and the findings of this study of Australian employers. The employers' language has been retained to provide authentic and rich descriptions of their views. Pseudonyms have been attributed where necessary to preserve anonymity.

The characteristics outdoor education employers sought in prospective employees.

The employers listed a variety of essential characteristics and competencies for OE employees. The responses identified examples generic to the profession and specific to their own organisation. The top 10 desired characteristics and competencies, as indicated by employers, are displayed in Table 3.

The hiring preferences of Australian employers concur in many instances with employers studied in the UK and USA (Barnes, 2004; Garvey & Gass, 1999; Maningas & Simpson, 2002; Plaut, 2001). Technical capabilities, experience, first aid training, and personal attributes were all factors important to employment. Characteristics such as attitude, motivation, initiative,

Table 3: Employers desired characteristics & competencies in a prospective outdoor educator or outdoor leader.

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

self-confidence, and flexibility were most sought after by employers. This finding concurs with research by Barnes (2004), Gassner (2002) and Thomas and Nicita (2003), that someone's attitude is a key contributor to their employability and their effectiveness. For example, one employer explained, "We look at the 'whole person,' their flexibility in different situations, and their ability to demonstrate initiative and to work as part of a team" (Michael). This finding is also consistent with Thomas' (2008) research on facilitation, which found that an emphasis on developing self-awareness and an understanding of the importance of personal qualities are essential foci in many facilitator education programs.

Practical experience in the outdoors and a broad range of skills were considered to be important requirements to OE employment, and preferably these experience and skills exceeded those required by certification standards. One employer emphasised the need for students to go beyond what is taught within courses, "It is also important what experience people have. Have they lead-climbed much? How much of these things have they done outside their course?" (Sam).

In terms of certifications, first aid was considered highly desirable for prospective employees, and while there is no formal requirement that an outdoor leader have a wilderness first aid certificate, many respondents indicated a preference for this qualification. The insistence for first aid training for potential employees was also found in the research conducted in the UK and

USA (Barnes, 2004; Guthrie, 2001; Zwaagstra, 2001). Respondents in this study also preferred to employ staff who have skills, knowledge and certifications in the activities used in the organisations' programs.

Formal certifications in OE, and specifically a degree, ranked higher than that of a Vocational Education and Training certificate and were seen as advantageous to employment prospects. Employers indicated a preference for employees who possessed an understanding of the theory and underpinning philosophy behind the skills acquired. However, the low ranking of degrees compared to other factors is similar to Barnes' (2004) findings in his UK study. Some of the main reasons employers placed a low ranking on OE degrees were the difficulties translating the skills learnt in a degree to nationally recognised training competencies, and the inability of graduates to understand the importance of context for the skills they had developed.

The key activity skills that employers sought in employees were bushwalking, rock climbing, canoeing, and flat-water paddling. Furthermore, a prospective employee's proven ability to conduct and facilitate these activities with others was viewed positively by employers. The ability to incorporate these skills into a coherent professional approach was also considered important, but employers acknowledged that this takes time to develop. As a final point, an employee's passion and enthusiasm for the outdoors and the profession was valued by the majority of employers. This final point made by employers links well with Ringer's (1995) comments that outdoor education practitioners need to bring with them not only the prerequisite skills and competencies but a passion and aliveness that invigorates the work that they do.

The qualities Australian employers in the outdoor profession expect in an OE graduate

The employers indicated that graduates from OE degrees needed to have a range of skills and attributes and four common themes emerged.

- **Specialist knowledge.** The respondents expect graduates to have specialist knowledge of their chosen area as well as the required certifications to allow them to practice in the field. However, employers warned that graduates should be careful to not overstate their own capabilities. This finding links with the research by Little and Cosgriff (2005) and Barnes (2004), which argued that graduates should have a depth of knowledge that serves as a foundation for effective practice.

- **Personal attributes.** Respondents expect OE graduates to have suitable attitudes, enthusiasm, passion, flexibility, and interpersonal skills. These attributes and skills need to be linked and blended with the required technical skills.

- **The ability to understand the theory and philosophy of outdoor education.** Respondents also expected graduates to demonstrate an understanding of the theories and philosophies that underpin OE so they can structure programs that incorporate OE theory. Furthermore, employers wanted graduates to have the capacity to communicate the principles and processes of OE to others in the community. These desired graduate attributes are consistent with what some academics have described as essential curriculum (Martin 2001; Guthrie 2001).

- **Professional considerations.** The respondents have an expectation that graduates with university OE degrees should be able to demonstrate a significant blend of judgment and professional capabilities that allows them to do more than just 'teach an activity.'

Finally, employers indicated that OE graduates should understand that they are at the starting point of their careers in outdoor education and that only time and experience in the field will enhance their development. Little and Cosgriff (2005) expressed a similar view that a degree course can only contribute to the development of a graduate up to a point, and that the development of judgment is an ongoing process. Graduates will require more personal development as they progress in the OE profession.

The perceptions employers have of OE graduates currently working in the profession

Many of the findings of this study mirror those established elsewhere in research. However, one important difference concerns the process used to develop outdoor education professionals in Australia. Also due to the small number of institutions offering OE degrees in Australia many of the issues identified by employers are specific to those institutions. Employers indicated four key benefits of employing OE graduates. First, many of the employers in this study agreed with the Garvey and Gass (1999) who argued that OE graduates have a deeper understanding of the methods, philosophy, and theory related to education.

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

Second, a degree provides graduates with a blend of practical experience and theory, which employers highlighted as a bonus in employment. Employers reported that graduates demonstrated a broader range of attributes, as evidenced by this comment from one employer.

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

Third, the respondents reported that graduates exhibit more passion for, and commitment to, the field of OE. One employer, John, explained,

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

Finally, graduates were reportedly more able to structure and facilitate experiences that engaged students, as evidenced in the following employer comment.

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

These findings should be tempered with the recommendations of Medina (2001) and Plaut (2001), who suggested academic degrees must be viewed in conjunction with other factors. In Australia these factors include personal attributes and outdoor experience beyond that of a degree. Deady's (2003) research noted that graduates required considerable experience in the field and employers' responses on the whole indicate that they have been happy with the graduates' levels of necessary experience and grounding in essential skills. Dumble (2005) indicated that fortunately the length of time required to develop mastery in outdoor activities normally allows judgment to be developed.

Employers' indicated that university graduates have the necessary grounding to develop such judgement, but of course all experience is contextual.

On the contrary, some employers listed no advantages in employing OE graduates, citing concerns with curriculum structure, the ideological influence of the institution, and arrogance amongst some graduates. The negative aspects of employing OE graduates described by employers in this study were surprisingly similar to the findings in Barnes' (2004) study of employers in the UK. The major concern seems to be that sometimes graduates have unrealistic expectations of their role and level of seniority within the profession. A number of employers commented that this aspect could be a function of differences between the two main education and training pathways of entry into the profession. Academic pathways follow a three to four year process while a vocational education pathway may take anywhere from six months to two years. It is possible that the different durations of these educational pathways contributes to the sense of superiority that some university graduates seem to have over their fellow employees who have followed the TAFE pathway. For some employers the distinctions between these two pathways are not clear, causing misunderstanding and tension around the issues of remuneration and recognition of time spent in education for the profession. The issue of judgment and experience was also important to some of the employers. Employers in Barnes' (2004) and this study indicated the need for graduates to spend time as assistant group leaders to establish their practical knowledge beyond the theory suggesting that graduates should not necessarily expect to start as group leaders or in positions of added responsibility.

Another interesting issue to emerge in this study was the challenge of balancing employers' needs versus their wants in prospective employees. Employers indicated a need for baseline skills to satisfy program requirements and fulfil day-to-day operations and subsequently these skills are often used as the benchmarks for prospective employees. In Australia, these skills tend to be the primary focus of the TAFE institutions, consistent with a competency-based vocational education and training system. However, employers also indicated that they want employees with strong theoretical foundations and an ability to see the broader issues and implications of OE. These employee capabilities, in addition to the aforementioned baseline skills, tend to be the focus of OE university degrees offered in Australia .

Another challenge was the employers' desire for staff with positive personal attributes, yet personal attributes are both difficult to quantify and assess in a recruitment process. While employers would like employees to have appropriate personal attributes, is it realistic to expect universities, or for that matter any

training institution, to 'teach' initiative or motivation? It is possible that these attributes are part of a person's inherent nature and not a function of training or educational programs.

The respondents in this study were happy to employ OE graduates but the employers struggled to translate a graduate's attributes and capabilities to the frameworks they use in their programs, which are typically based on a vocational education and training model. It appears that universities offering OE degrees have failed to successfully articulate the capacity of their graduates to work in the profession based on the skills and knowledge they have developed within the degrees. Academics may also have also failed to clearly explain how the skills and knowledge are developed and compare to other forms of training that are present in Australia. The instigation of the Professional Activity Statements by the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (Dingle, 2005) may help to address this confusion and uncertainty. If universities are going to educate graduates using approaches that are different to the more commonly understood models, then a language that is transparent and clearly understood is needed.

Conclusion

This study sought to improve understanding between employers, academics, and OE graduates by describing where OE graduates fit as employees in the outdoor profession of Australia. I believe that a number of key issues have been identified, which will hopefully guide further discussion between these parties and further research on the process and/or outcomes. For prospective employees there is much that can be learned from the comments made by the employers in this study. When seeking employment, prospective employees should highlight their personal attributes and show how they have acquired a broad range of skills and knowledge necessary to work in the profession. OE graduates should take some comfort knowing that employers do see advantages in employing OE graduates compared to other individuals, but graduates will need to develop their skills, knowledge and experience beyond what is taught in university classes and practical trips. The additional efforts outside formal course contact time will help them to develop judgment and encourage an openness to new and different methods of practice. Based on the employers' views in this study, graduates should have a sober perspective of their level of experience and be careful to avoid appearing arrogant with employers. As indicated by the employers, a degree is only the starting point, which creates the opportunity to work in the profession allowing an employee to develop experience and judgement on the job.

The findings in this study also suggest that providers of degree programs could more effectively communicate the content, processes and foci of degree programs and the skills, knowledge, and experience that graduate acquire in these programs. This will help employers to better understand how degree programs equip someone to work in the outdoor profession compared to other pathways. Universities should be proactive in this respect, not only to assist their current graduates but also as a way to attract new students to their courses. Hopefully this study will engage people in a discussion that recognises the respective strengths and weaknesses of different pathways of education and training that can lead to employment in the outdoor profession.

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