

Graduate Resilience Project Report
September 2016

Shelley Morgan

Careers & Employment Adviser – September 2016

Executive Summary

This report explores graduate 'resilience', specifically looking at how students transition after graduating. Funding was granted to Lancaster University by HECSU in 2015 to research this important topic.

The original proposed methodology aimed to discover why graduates drop out within the first six months of a graduate role/ scheme, but this methodology evolved and expanded to include graduates whose contract ended, who experienced challenges in gaining employment, or were considered to be 'underemployed' by DLHE standards 6-12 months after graduating.

The project gathered the views and perceptions of 37 graduate employers and 1 recruiter. This research was undertaken to understand how universities can interpret and understand the needs of employers and match provision accordingly.

The findings identified that graduates are under-confident in their own abilities; that softer skills required for the workplace were a concern, that they felt they lacked relevant work experience, and were not ready for the graduate labour market.

These findings reflected the opinions of the graduate employers surveyed, although there were subtle differences in interpretation, e.g. a deeper graduate level of understanding of soft skills like communication and team work. Tasks like professional writing, sharing information in a team, and adapting from a university lifestyle to the workplace were identified. Commercial awareness also featured strongly as a challenge faced by graduates. Additionally, employers appeared to lack awareness of how difficult students may find the recruitment process.

A particularly important part of this research is that recommendations for the future were received from graduates and employers. Overall, when combined with strategic aims for Lancaster University, recommendations focus on three key areas for improvement:

1. Employability/ engagement
2. Prioritising the development of confidence to perform
3. Marketing of the Careers Service offer

These categories provide a strategy for how to improve connections and communication between graduates and employers so that each understands the other's perspective, needs, and requirements. This research advocates asking employers to trial the use of sector and skill shortage information sheets at events and using the Lancaster Careers website to be explicit about the needs and expectations of each employer. This can also aim to generate realistic expectations amongst students that they can take with them to employment. Additionally, to improve confidence and to create a sense of community, peer to peer mentoring will aim to demystify recruitment processes and the day to day expectations of the workplace, offer support, and help students to develop resilience to continue applying for opportunities and use these lessons in their future employment.

Contents

Introduction: Context for the Graduate Resilience Project	Page 4
Terminology	Page 4
Methodology	Page 5
Challenges	Page 6
Graduate Cohort	Page 7
Employer Cohort	Page 8
Graduate Findings	Page 9
Employer Findings	Page 14
Conclusions	Page 17
Recommendations	Page 19
Sample Implementation Strategy	Page 20
Recommendations for Future Research	Page 20

Introduction

The idea of resilience has become more widespread as the economic climate in which graduates work changes. Fifty years ago, a graduate may have been expected to be ready for work after their graduate training two years after university, but now graduates are often expected to be “work-ready” immediately after joining a company. It was likely also that those graduates came from a very particular middle-class background, arguably better equipped by their parents and upbringing for the graduate labour market, which has been the topic of many prominent pieces of research. It is perhaps no surprise that many graduates without support mechanisms in place are struggling to meet the demand to make the transition from student to employee.

Aims of the project:

- Gain deeper understanding of factors limiting the success of graduates using a sample of 40 graduate interviewees
- Understand employer’s interpretation of skill shortages and resilience
- Identify how Careers Services can support employers to enhance graduate resilience
- Devise and implement a set of recommendation to address identified issues

Terminology

For the purpose of this study, Lancaster University Careers staff agreed that the definition of ‘resilience’ can be summarised as the ability to overcome barriers, adapt to problems in the workplace as they arise, and find appropriate solutions, including the following:

- Managing unrealistic expectations of the workplace/ role
- Using a logical approach
- Thinking innovatively
- Taking ownership
- Not giving up at the first hurdle

As this is a broad topic, the research focussed on work-readiness and using softer skills including communication, time management, the ability to prioritise, and making decisions.

Methodology

(October –December 2015)

1. Devised a suitable survey and tested it with one willing graduate
2. Surveyed employers at Careers Fairs held at Lancaster University

(January – March 2016)

1. Used the graduation exit survey and DLHE data to identify graduates who dropped out of their programme within the first six months
2. Surveyed identified graduates by telephone

(April – July 2016)

1. Adapted approach to widen the pool of potential respondents by contacting those graduates who had identified a support need after graduation
2. Surveyed willing respondents electronically
3. Elicited more in-depth responses by identifying individuals and then interviewing them in person

(August – September 2016)

1. Conducted analysis of the collected data
2. Presented initial findings at the AGCAS Annual Conference

Data was collected from graduates in the following ways:

1. Telephone call (10)
2. Electronic (26)
3. Face to face (4)

Data was collected from employers in the following way:

1. Face to face (38)

Challenges

There were two key challenges:

1) Minimal yield of graduates from original proposed research methodology

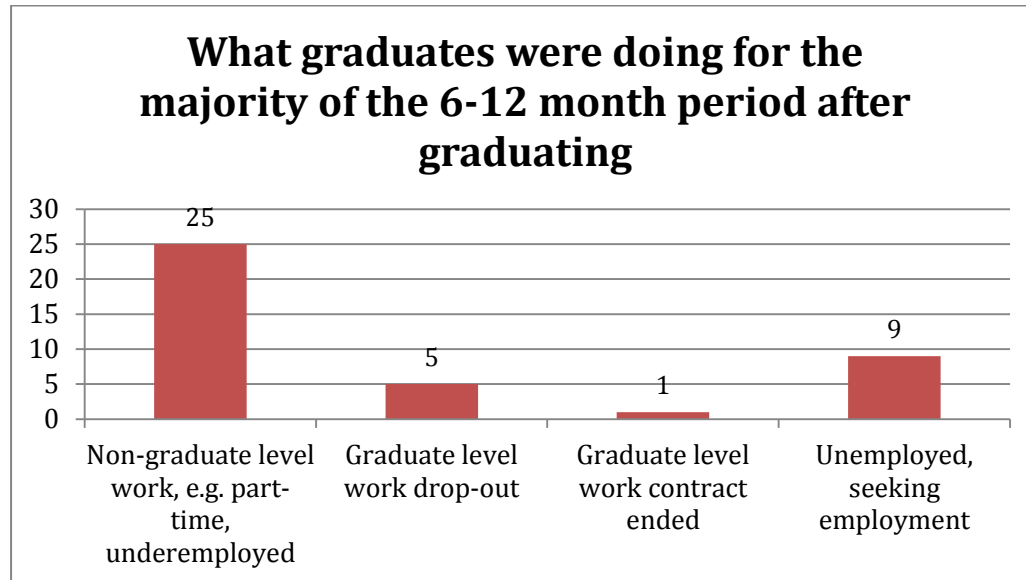
This project had two distinct phases according to the success of the methods used. The proposed methodology (October 2015 to March 2016) was to contact those graduates who had stated they would be employed after graduation during their exit survey, but who were then unemployed during the DLHE survey. This yielded few results, and led to the initial finding that many graduates struggle to define the job they are entering. Some of those contacted stated that they were doing the same job but had titled it differently when taking the surveys.

2) Staffing

To support the project, the funding bid identified the appointment of a member of student staff to collect data. This proved to be a challenge as the first student appointed was unable to fulfil the contracted hours, and a second student was then appointed.

Graduate Cohort

Firstly, graduates were asked to identify what they were doing after graduation either through choice or necessity. As the initial focus of the study was to understand what makes graduates drop-out but there was not a high proportion to draw from, it was important to gather information about what they were doing for the majority of the period investigated and the characteristics of the cohort.



Gender	Number
Male	26
Female	14

Mature student	Number
Yes	2
No	38

Graduation year	Number
2012	1
2014	23
2015	16

Disability identified	Number
Yes	7
No	33

Although graduates were not targeted according to their academic discipline we were able to gain respondents from across the university.

Faculty	Number
FASS: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences	23
FST: Faculty of Science and Technology	12
LUMS: Management School	4
FHM: Faculty of Health & Medicine	1

Classification	Number	Gender: F	Gender: M	Number Unemployed
1 st	9	3	6	1
2.1	27	11	16	8
2.2	3	0	3	0
Award	1	0	1	0

Employer Cohort

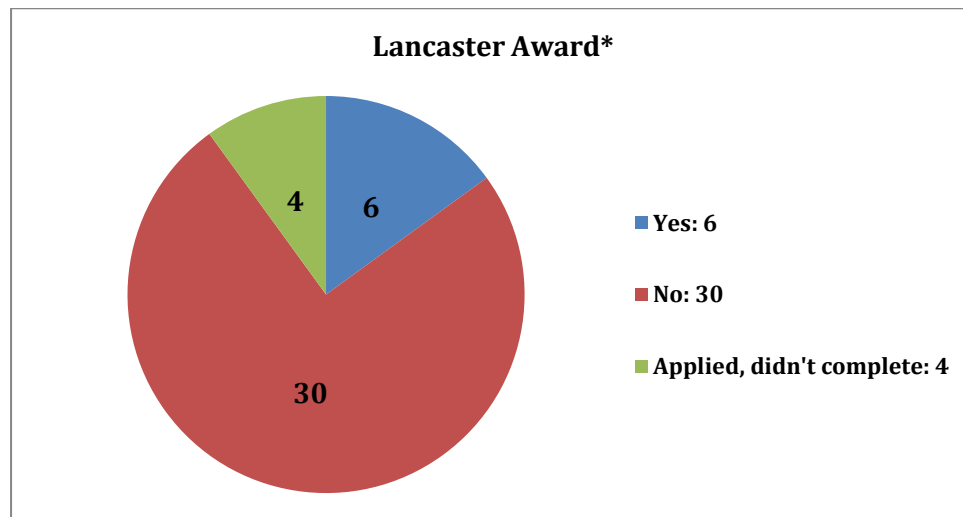
Utilising resources available on campus, employers in this study were identified and approached at the Careers Fairs and events happening in Michaelmas term (October - December) 2015. This offered a wide range of contacts from different sectors to interview.

Sector	Number
Business Consulting	1
Law	8
Consumer Goods	2
Retail	3
Charity	1
Energy and Utilities	2
Engineering & Manufacturing	4
Accountancy, Banking, & Finance	2
Hospitality	1
Information Technology	2
Telecommunications	2
Law Enforcement & Security	3
Science & Pharmaceutical	2
Teaching & Education	1
Transport & Logistics	3
Recruiter	1
Total:	38

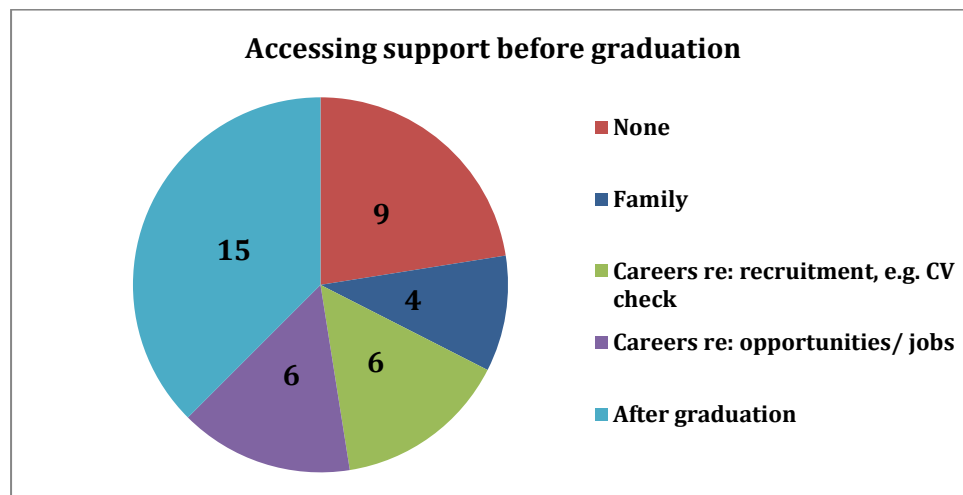
Graduate findings

In order to analyse engagement with the offering of the Lancaster University Careers Service, participation in the Lancaster (employability) Award and whether the graduate accessed support before leaving the university were documented.

Further analysis on each graduate's level of engagement with other Careers provision will take place following this report.



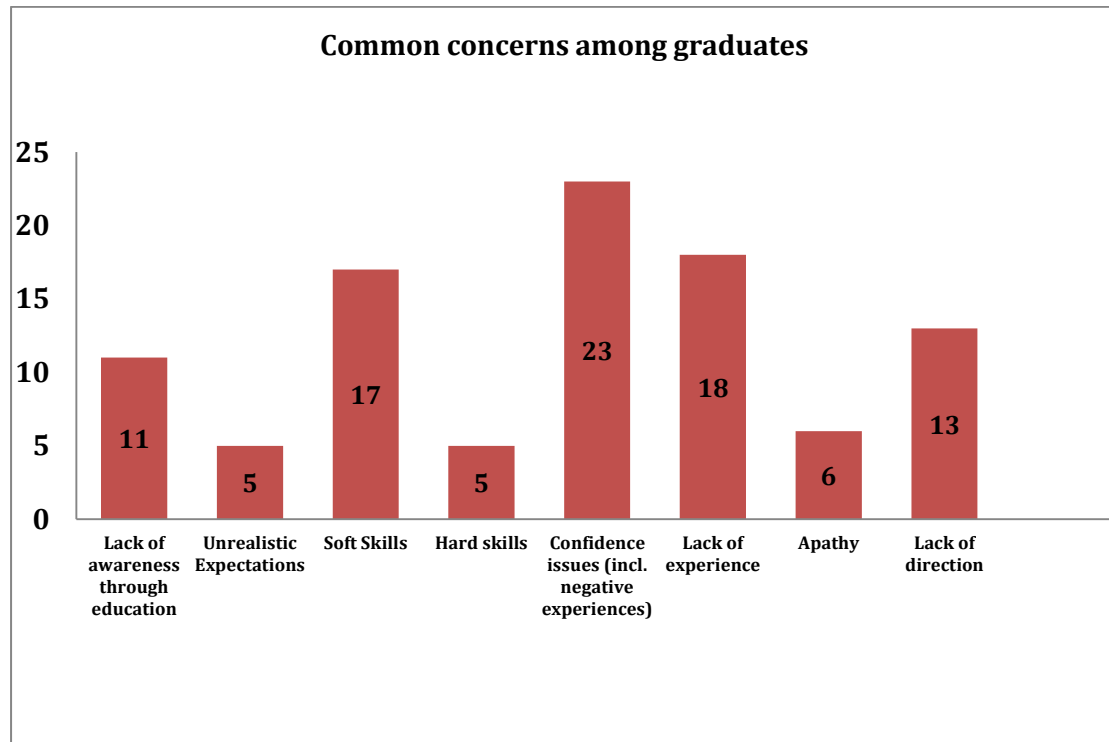
* [Lancaster Award](#)



Why support was not accessed before graduation

- "Thought the area was too specific to receive proper advice" (*wanted to become a pilot*)
- "Proactive support would have been helpful" (*felt the Careers service should make students do Careers related activities*)
- "Can be more honest with family" (*trusted the advice and support of family and friends*)
- "I would have spoken to more people but thought as a postgraduate I should be sorting things out for myself" (*didn't seek advice from anyone*)

The following collation of common concerns among graduates is a representation of responses to several questions. Graduates were asked what their role was after graduating, what the reasons were for choosing that employer, and whether they had previous experience in that area. This gave the graduates more scope to answer honestly and brought their concerns up naturally, including their negative experiences of the recruitment process and the skills/ experiences they felt they lacked.



Three main areas split by attributes (statistics rounded to the nearest figure)

1. Confidence (23/40)
2. Lack of relevant experience (18/40)
3. Lack of softer skills (17/40)

Confidence in own ability (11/23)

Attribute	Variable	Number
Identified disability		4
Mature student		0
Gender	Male	6
	Female	5
Faculty	FASS	6
	FST	4
	LUMS	1
	FHM	0

Negative experiences in the workplace affecting confidence (12/23)

Attribute	Variable	Number
Identified disability		2
Mature student		1
Gender	Male	9
	Female	3

Faculty	FASS	8
	FST	2
	LUMS	2
	FHM	0

Negative experiences with the recruitment process which affected confidence:

- “lack of responses to applications”
- “the number of applications and the 0% success rate is demoralising”
- “lack of experience made me feel less confident”
- “a number of rejections, largely due to a ‘lack of experience’”
- “not getting feedback on why I hadn’t been shortlisted”

This was a particularly interesting angle as the interpretation of resilience is widened to include the process of recruitment and how challenging this was.

Lack of relevant experience (18/40)

Attribute	Variable	Number
Identified disability		3
Mature student		0
Gender	Male	11
	Female	7
Faculty	FASS	9
	FST	6
	LUMS	3
	FHM	0

Identified softer skills as a concern (17/40)

Attribute	Variable	Number
Identified disability		5
Mature student		2
Gender	Male	11
	Female	6
Faculty	FASS	12
	FST	3
	LUMS	2
	FHM	0

Types of softer skills

- Communication
- Time management: Prioritising/ multi-tasking/ organising
- Difficulty in leadership/ roles of responsibility
- Team work

Types of technical skills

- IT skills: Excel/ Advanced Excel, Microsoft Packages
- Data interrogation
- IT systems/ software in the workplace, e.g. used in particular sectors

Positive graduate reflections on employment

- “Discovered that I can work well in an office environment”
- “Helped me to realise I am good at managing my time and being organised”
- “Helped me to realise skills I didn't know I had such as the ability to work quickly and creativity”
- “I was worried that a lack of experience would hold me back and I would feel out of my depth, but colleagues helped me to develop the relevant skills to be successful”

Projections for one student were that she would be completing “menial tasks” but she was happy that she was given more in-depth activities to be responsible for.

There were fewer positive reflections than negative. The majority of comments tended to focus on how valuable they deemed the developed skills to be rather than a positive reflection on the experience itself. This was consistent across graduates who had taken part-time work, short term contracts, and those who had dropped out of graduate level employment.

Negative graduate reflections on employment

- “It took over my entire life. There were more things than you could possibly do in the time”
- “It was busier than I expected. More full on”
- “You get told what to expect, but it was worse than I expected. It was more pressured than I expected. There were weeks when I didn't get any days off. The hours were really unsociable”
- “I kind of expected them to offer me a job after the 3 months because I adapted and learned a lot and did the work despite not having the background for it, but they didn't”
- “I was expecting a lot more reconciliation”
- “It was just very hard work, the sheer volume of workload, and I didn't enjoy it”
- The role “involved doing day-to-day administrative tasks”

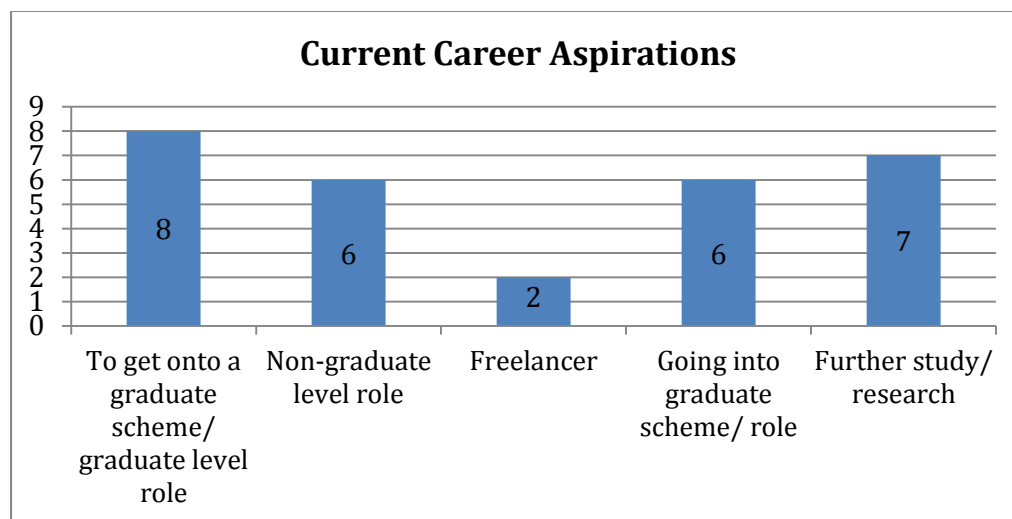
One graduate reflected that numerous issues with a manager underestimating his capability gave him a negative view of the employment he was in. He felt there was a reluctance to give out opportunities which has resulted in him feeling he had wasted time.

One graduate mentioned that the placement he took had convinced him to change his career aspirations as gaining experience in HR had dissuaded him from pursuing that career.

The quotes and commentaries above summarise some of the key patterns of opinion of graduates entering the labour market. Analysing this data, it appears clear that graduates were not expecting the volume or intensity of workload and were expecting to receive more in recognition of their efforts. Linking this back to resilience; these explanations were given when graduates were asked to reflect on their expectations of the workplace suggesting that their strategies for dealing with the issues raised were under-developed.

In order to understand what graduates felt could have improved their experience of transition to the graduate labour market, they were asked to make recommendations. These suggestions were unprompted, graduates were given an open opportunity to make a complaint, raise a concern, or praise the services they used. The results gathered after asking this question demonstrate that there is work to be done in marketing and engagement as many of these activities regularly take place on campus, e.g. specialist support, work experience opportunities. The most frequent recommendation, to embed Careers Service support in the departments, will allow the Careers team to emphasise the view of graduates in future discussions in faculty.

Graduate cohort recommendations	Number
Careers support in the department/ embedded	12
Clear communication/ marketing from Careers earlier	9
Place onus on the student (happy with the Careers Service)	5
Link with alumni/ presentations on campus	4
Provide specialist support for all areas of employment	4
Schedule compulsory Careers appointments	4
Offer work experiences/ opportunities and support	3
Offer extra training/ qualifications whilst studying, e.g. IT	2



Graduates were surveyed on their current careers aspirations (at the time of survey) to inform future Careers Service provision (See recommendations, page 16). The findings conclude that graduates have disparate aspirations implying that several methods of engagement and marketing should be trialled to make messages feel relevant to all students, with support for those looking into non-graduate level roles. The categories “going into graduate scheme/ role” and “further study/ research” refer to graduates who had secured those opportunities at the time of survey.

Examples of:

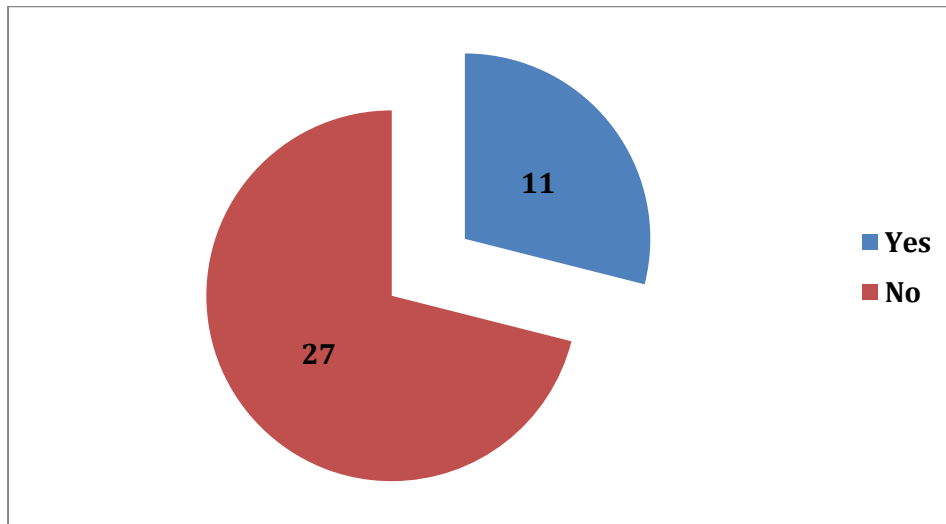
Freelance – Copy Editor, Journalist

Non-graduate level - Sports Development, Fashion Stylist, Patent Office, Church

Employer findings

Do you see retention as an issue?

At the start of the interview, employers were not asked directly about resilience in order to understand any perceived connection between dropping-out and graduate resilience. The findings suggest that the majority of surveyed employers described issues related to resilience but did not see these factors as affecting retention.



To further analyse what leads to retention issues, employers were asked to identify any factors they knew led to graduates leaving their role.

When it is, why?

- Weekend work, shift patterns, long hours, high workload
- Students accept multiple offers of employment and cannot accept them all
- Students do not meet the criteria for conditional offers, e.g. fail exams
- Location preferences not met
- Perceived lack of progression
- Security checks
- Tough working environment
- Not dealing well with change
- Enticed by the salary
- Career fit: not right for the role/ doesn't like the work

It was important to understand whether retention had an impact on recruitment, however, based on responses to previous questions, this was not as relevant for some respondents.

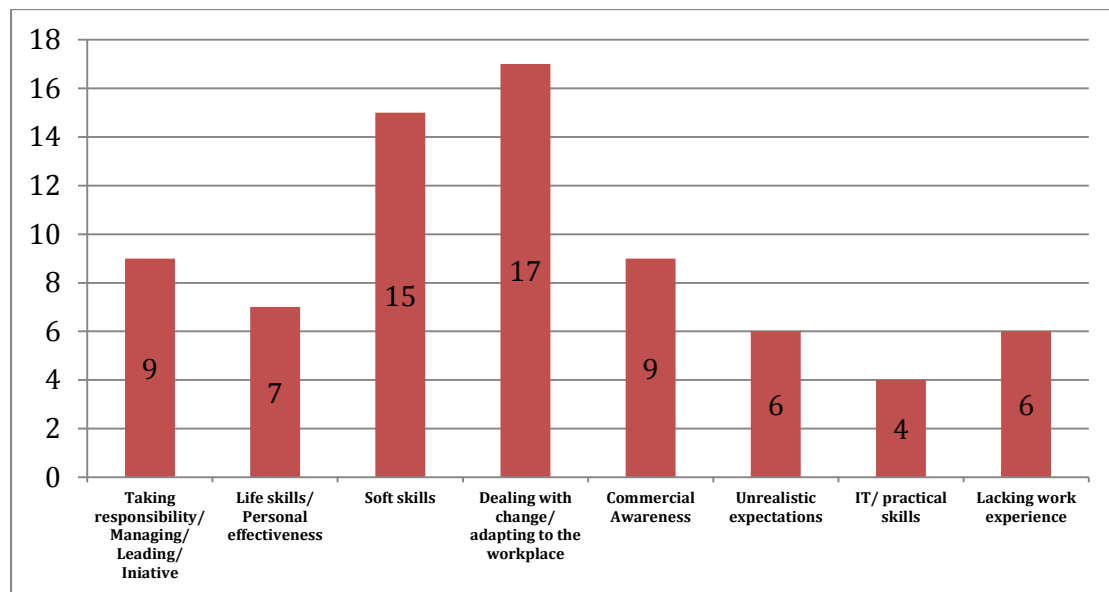
Do you over-recruit to compensate for anticipated drop-out?	
Yes	7
No	26
Unanswered, N/A	5

The following two variations on the same question identified what graduates were likely to find challenging in their first year of work and in work in general. Answers to the first question identify what the short term issues are considered to be after leaving university and offers the most scope for recommendations to allow universities to equip their graduates with appropriate skills.

Challenges that graduates might typically face in their first year of work (as identified by employers)

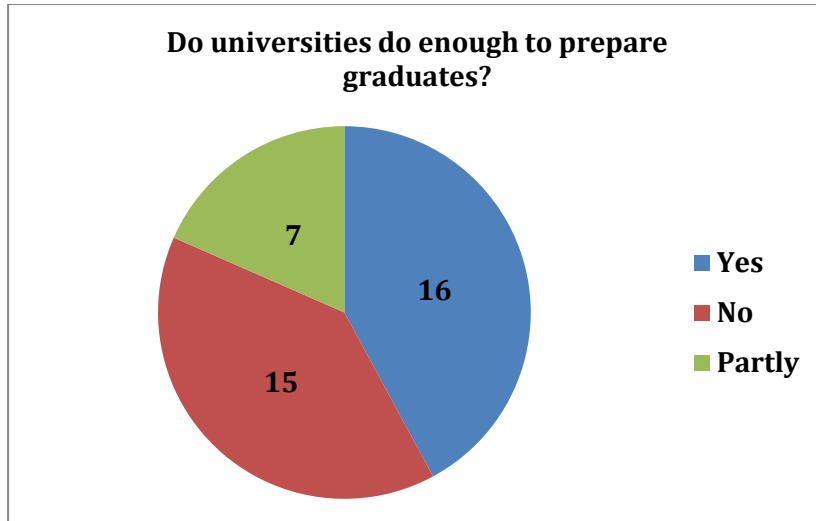
Time management including prioritisation and the 9-5 working day	13
Cultural change from university/ adapting to different working styles/ locations (fear of the unknown)	12
Work hard/ smart including associated stress levels	8
Leadership, responsibility, accountability	7
Commercial awareness, complexity/ scale of the company, global reach	6
Working in a team (not trying to do everything alone)	5
Moving on from mistakes, using initiative, problem solving	3
Continuous fast-paced learning, including IT/ technical knowledge	3
Work-life balance, completing qualifications, time for socialising	3
Recruitment process/ competition	2

Overall issues faced by graduates (as identified by employers)



Employer interpretations of the term ‘resilience’

- Team working: not trying to do everything alone
- Social skills
- Cultural change: adapting to the workplace
- Time management: 9-5 workday and overtime
- Emotional intelligence
- Staying upbeat whilst making mistakes/ learning
- Dealing with stress, self-discipline/ restraint
- Sense of entitlement



In this chart ‘partly’ refers to academic preparation, but a lack of work-ready skills. This question is of particular importance as it was not asked specifically about Lancaster University. Employers were asked to rate the efforts of all universities and the findings were split. With 16 employers stating that universities are doing enough but 22 mentioning that they didn’t think universities did enough or that they only prepared graduates academically, this gave a split view of the system as a whole. These results imply that graduate recruiters believe it is partly the education provider’s responsibility to prepare graduates with work-ready skills. This led to recommendations to conduct further study with both local and national employers about their recruitment expectations and sector/ skill shortages to present this information to faculties for further emphasis on skill and opportunity development in the curriculum.

Conclusions

Attributes and outcomes; findings from this research:

Gender

- 57% of respondents mentioned an issue related to confidence affected their transition after graduating (57% of 14 female, 58% of 26 male respondents).
- 45% of respondents identified a concern that they lacked relevant experience (50% of 14 female, 42% of 26 male respondents).
- 43% of respondents identified they felt they lacked softer skills (43% of 14 female, 42% of 26 male respondents).

Faculty

- Of the cohort surveyed
 - FASS graduates accounted for 57%, FST 30%, LUMS 10%, FHM 3%
- 61% (of 23 respondents) FASS graduates identified a confidence related issue, 39% felt they lacked relevant experience, 52% felt they lacked softer skills.
- 50% (of 12 respondents) FST graduates identified a confidence related issue, 50% felt they lacked relevant experience, 25% felt they lacked softer skills.
- 75% (of 4 respondents) LUMS graduates identified a confidence related issue, 75% felt they lacked relevant experience, 75% felt they lacked softer skills.
- 1 FHM graduate was surveyed and did not identify any of the issues.

Classification

- There appears to be little connection between a 2.2 and unemployment/ under-employment.
- Graduates who earned a 2.1 classification were most likely to be unemployed in this study.

Identified a disability (7)

- 86% (of 7 respondents) identified a confidence issue, 43% felt they lacked relevant experience, 71% felt they lacked softer skills.

Mature student (at point of entry to university) (2)

- 1 respondent mentioned a previous negative experience of employment had affected their confidence, neither respondent mentioned feeling they lacked experience, both felt they lacked softer skills.

Advice from employers

- Enhance softer skills/ professional effectiveness
- Conduct research and find a suitable role; tailor applications
- Develop a real-world perspective; gain work experience
- Gain/ enhance IT/Business/Office skills
- Develop people and life skills; become more employable
- Develop realistic expectations
- Network

Based on the definition originally given of resilience, this project concludes that a defining feature of graduate's ability to overcome barriers both in the recruitment process and in the workplace itself, adapt to problems, and find appropriate solutions, lies in a combination of confidence issues and a combination of skills and attributes which can be categorised as commercial awareness. Graduates were unsure of themselves and their abilities, but also lacked informed knowledge of what employers look for in a graduate, how they might impress them, and how they could be expected to be rewarded for their efforts. Long working hours combined with little recognition or responsibility affected many of those surveyed.

Associated attributes to resilience were mentioned by both graduates and employers, but the nuances were particularly understood by employers. For many graduates the term "resilience" was not mentioned, and they were not asked for their comments on their resilience explicitly. Some graduate comments reviewed in this report imply that the lack of response in the recruitment process made them want to give up and gave them a negative view of their prospects. One quote from a graduate: "You get told what to expect, but it was worse than I expected" summarises the lack of realistic expectations even when advised what to expect, lacking a logical process of reflection and review as she was enticed by money. For some graduates it was their inability to or lack of opportunity to take responsibility and ownership of a task or activity, and lacking the confidence to address this or think innovatively about how to improve their situation.

Recommendations

Category 1: Employability/ Engagement

1. Trial compulsory booking of a Careers intervention for cohorts from departments with poor DLHE outcomes: prompts from academics to mention career planning at academic 1:1 tutorials
2. Engage male students through peer to peer support and using early career graduates
3. Trial an opt-out version of the Lancaster Award, rather than an opt-in, meaning students have to actively choose not to do it (recruit extra staff for the marking period)
4. Highlight skills gaps noticed by employers in departmental meetings to raise awareness (consultation over DLHE is looking at skills and use of skills)
5. Offer more opportunities and support to students to access local organisations in the North West during their study
6. Tailor and adapt support workshops according to year of study, academic term, and recruitment process timescales

Category 2: Prioritising the development of confidence

1. Incorporate life skills, coping strategies, and confidence into Careers offering (online formats)
2. Pilot the addition of a confidence online workshop as a compulsory element of the Lancaster Award with the view to expand to the wider student population
3. Use web chat/ webinar facilities in place of face to face workshops to build initial confidence
4. Recruit Careers/ Lancaster Award Ambassadors to complete peer to peer encouragement and marketing
5. Collaborate with welfare services at the university including online learning
6. Adapt current behaviours/ knowledge/ attitudes towards Careers support through positive messages, to improve confidence and encourage realistic expectations

Category 3: Marketing

1. Targeted information for employers at Careers Fairs: give employers the information to communicate to students about skill gaps
2. Collect further data from employers to identify skills/ sector shortages before attending Careers Fairs to inform future Careers Service provision
3. Use Lancaster University's new intranet system and Careers Registration data to target and engage final year students
4. Develop fun activities to improve student attendance/ confidence to attend, e.g. pizza evenings, chocolate fountains, to build softer skills during the first term of the academic year (October – December)
5. Increased number of networking training and opportunities
6. Increase use of social media to engage students to attend events
7. Conduct additional research through student consultation to confirm these findings and to ask the opinions of the current cohort
8. Continually seek feedback and evaluate the impact of Careers provision with departments

Sample Implementation Strategy

To address	Proposed solutions	By when/ whom
Students struggle to develop softer skills during their time at university	1) Trial fun activities run by Careers/ welfare/ Student's Union which encourages informal networking	Michaelmas (Term 1) 2016/ Careers/ Welfare Services/ SU
	2) Increase the amount of networking opportunities available on campus to build on the success of the Networking Club run in 2015/16	Lent (Term 2)/ Summer (Term 3) 2017/ Careers Advisers
Students and employers have a different understanding of 'soft' skills	1) Invite employers to work closely with the university to fully define their terminology/ how it will be assessed during the recruitment process.	Michaelmas 2016/ Careers Service key employer account holders
	2) Employers to complete new preparatory forms before attending a Careers Fair, identifying issues they face regarding resilience and preparing students for what they must do	Lent/ Summer 2016/ Employer Liaison Officer

For information about the implementation strategy please contact Shelley Morgan:
s.morgan1@lancaster.ac.uk

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional research areas have been identified to be taken forward by Lancaster University's Quality and Information Manager, Diane Richardson. Lancaster University offers each student access to Careers Services for the rest of their life but when contacted to be given this support they chose not to access it so the first piece of research is to examine and profile those students, what barriers they face, and how they can be supported in future. Another research area is whether the implementation of coaching rather than advice and guidance is a more relevant pursuit for students early in their academic career whilst at university.

Additionally, the findings suggest there is mismatch between what employers think graduates struggle with compared to what the graduates themselves think they struggle with so additional research could help Lancaster University to demystify these inconsistencies for both graduates and employers.