

Motivations, perceptions and employability:

Why companies hire
international students

Ready/grad

Get the Edge



Executive summary

The employment landscape for recent graduates is highly competitive, and industry feedback is that graduates often aren't ready for the study to work transition.

The challenges for international students are even more pronounced.

Australian universities are increasingly focused on delivering work-ready graduates, using various methods including work-integrated learning, curriculum designed in collaboration with industry, and internships.

The opportunity to gain invaluable work experience has long been understood as a significant contributor to international students' achievement of post-graduation career goals in Australia. Indeed, research into international student decision-making confirms that career outcomes are a key determinant of where and what international students choose to study, because international students understand that the career outcome from an overseas degree must justify the financial cost of their studies.

Over a 13-year period Readygrad (part of Gradability Pty Ltd) has worked with over 25,000 international students, with an outstanding track record in helping them to achieve positive employment outcomes. Historically around 40% of their international students have received an employment offer from the host company they undertook their internship placement with.

Delving into Readygrad's network of 5,000 host companies and database of past student interns this research explores why employers engage with international students as interns, and ultimately why they hired them.

This paper presents the results of two anonymous surveys of employers and international interns who have completed a three-month internship placement facilitated through Readygrad. The research sought to understand the internship experience from both points of view.

The research design also incorporated extensive qualitative feedback, providing extra insight into the experiences of interns and employers in their own words.

Both surveys were conducted online from August to September 2018. The employer survey received 285 responses (210 complete and 75 partial) and the intern survey received 541 responses (340 complete and 201 partial).

The results of the surveys demonstrate very clearly the value of internships to international students, but perhaps more surprising is the strength of the benefits to employers, and the passion for hosting interns that comes from these positive experiences.

Key findings

Internships are an important route to employment for interns

Of the interns surveyed, 29% were employed by the company they completed their internship with and 21% were employed by a different company. Of those who were employed after their internship, 60% said their internship was a very important factor in their being employed, with a further 26% saying it was quite important.

Interns viewed their ability to show a good work ethic, their technical and practical skills, and their willingness to learn as the most important reasons they were employed, and employers agreed with them.

Employers hire interns with great technical skills and work ethic, but teamwork is also crucial

Employers were most likely to cite interns' technical and practical skills as the most important factor contributing to whether they hired an intern on an ongoing basis. But employers were also hiring interns with a strong work ethic, which 50% of employers listed in their top two reasons for offering ongoing employment. Being a good team fit was also cited as an important factor by employers, but not by interns, demonstrating interns perhaps undervalue their soft skills. Clearly, a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' skills is still in demand from employers, even in highly technical roles, and internships are an excellent opportunity to develop softer skills like teamwork, and indeed to develop interns' awareness of these skills as critical factors in their ongoing career success.

Internships significantly boost perceptions of overall employability

Employers indicated that interns' overall employability improved significantly during their internships. Pre-internship, 30% of employers rated their interns' overall employability as good or very good, which increased to 87% after their internships.

Interns also reported a boost in their employability: pre-internship 41% rated their own employability as good or very good, compared to 82% post-internship.

Internships benefit employees' understanding of the needs of Australian workplaces

One of the key barriers to entry into employment for international students and graduates is a lack of confidence in their understanding of what Australian employers expect from employees.

In this instance, exposure to work delivers huge benefits: 76% of interns viewed Australian employers more positively after their internships (33% of said their internship experience made their perception of Australian businesses and employers "much more positive" and 43% said their views were "somewhat more positive").

This boost in positive sentiment builds a foundation for mutual trust, as well as confidence in international graduates that they are well equipped to succeed in their careers.

Internships are very rewarding for employers and interns

Overall, the internship experience is very positive for both parties: 38% of interns rate their internship experience as outstanding, and 34% as very good. Employers are less effusive, with 15% rating their experiences as outstanding, and 55% as very good.

Clearly, both interns and host employers who have participated in an internship can see the mutual value they bring.

Employers are motivated by altruism, but they understand the benefits to their business

The top-ranked reason given by employers for investing time and effort into international interns is an altruistic one: to help a young person get a start in their career. But behind that altruism sits a foundation of sound business sense: employers may engage with international interns to involve them with a specific project or piece of work; and as a way of engaging with graduate talent and even helping to assesses for future employment potential. Indeed, most employers surveyed revealed that they had offered interns ongoing employment at the end of their internships.

Employers and interns don't always agree on their pre-internship skills

The surveys found that compared to employers, interns tend to over-estimate their pre-internship employability, and particularly their level of technical and practical skill. By the end of the internship, expectations were better aligned, giving interns a more realistic picture of what they need to do to succeed.

The most successful internships require work on both sides, to benefit both sides

Employers also made a strong case that when it comes to internships, you get back what you put in, and that by providing good mentoring and support, the business stands to benefit along with the intern.



Internships are an important route to employment for interns

Clearly, an employability-focused activity should be judged on its success in helping interns achieve their career goals. This means looking beyond just employment rates, and considering whether they are employed in a role and organisation that contributes meaningfully to their career development, wellbeing and life goals.

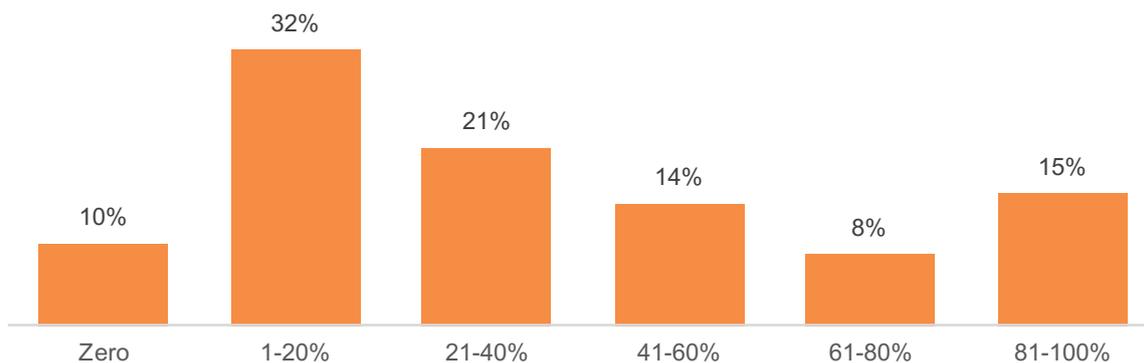
This intern survey considered whether interns had gone onto employment, with a focus of understanding how their internship experience contributed to that outcome.

Half of interns surveyed found ongoing employment following their internships, including 29% who were employed by their host company, and 21% at a different company.

Of those who were employed after their internship, 86% said their internship was very important (60%) or quite important (26%), with only 3% saying it was not at all important to their employment at all.

From the employer point of view, 90% of employers surveyed had offered at least one of their interns ongoing employment.

Of the international interns you have hosted, approximately what percentage has your company employed as a result of their internship?



Overall, this is a strong endorsement of the internship model as a foundational element of international students' successful career development.

Employers hire interns with great technical skills and work ethic, but teamwork is also crucial

Of the employers who had gone on to hire their international interns on an ongoing basis, their technical and practical skills were most likely to be the most important factor (37% of employers ranked this as their top factor), but having a strong work ethic was arguably at least as important, because it was more likely to be in the top two (50% had it in their top two factors). Being a good team fit was the third most important factor.

Employers: Thinking about the international interns you offered paid employment, what were the most important reasons for employing them?

	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5
Technical/practical skills	37%	5%	8%	8%	5%
Work ethic	29%	21%	8%	5%	2%
They fitted in well with the team	13%	12%	16%	7%	7%
Willingness to learn	6%	7%	14%	17%	8%
Enthusiasm	4%	9%	9%	13%	14%
Contribution to the team's work	4%	8%	11%	17%	10%
Knowledge of subject matter	2%	16%	8%	2%	3%
Communication - verbal	2%	4%	3%	5%	7%
Problem solving skills/critical thinking	2%	2%	3%	9%	26%
Multilingual capability	2%	2%	3%	6%	0%
Knowledge of international markets	1%	2%	0%	0%	2%
Communication - written	0%	7%	12%	6%	4%
Adaptability to new situations/tasks	0%	5%	4%	6%	9%
Cultural contribution to the team	0%	0%	0%	1%	3%

Interns agree with employers on the key factors: the interns who were employed following their internships clearly understand that their technical and practical skills, and work ethic, were the main factors in their employment.

Interns significantly underestimated the importance of team fit and enthusiasm, which employers see as being highly important. These are soft skills which internships can and should develop and improve, as interns gain exposure to team work in a business context. The reality is that most businesses require staff who can work collaboratively across multidisciplinary teams, which is very difficult for universities to prepare graduates for, simply because university courses tend to be focused on single disciplines.

Developing interns' understanding of the importance of soft skills to their employability is both a key goal and a strength of professional internship programs, presenting an opportunity to develop capabilities that international graduates may not adequately focus on otherwise.

Interns: What do you think were the most important reasons you were employed?

	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5
My technical/practical skills	40%	9%	4%	4%	6%
I showed a good work ethic	31%	27%	4%	3%	0%
I showed a willingness to learn	6%	9%	9%	6%	8%
My knowledge of subject matter	5%	12%	19%	2%	2%
I was adaptable to new situations/tasks	4%	4%	5%	6%	5%
My verbal communication skills	3%	5%	4%	17%	8%
I made a valuable contribution to the team's work	3%	4%	8%	12%	14%
I showed enthusiasm	3%	7%	7%	12%	15%
I fitted in well with the team	2%	8%	16%	10%	14%
My cultural contribution to the team	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%
My written communication skills	1%	10%	11%	12%	5%
My problem solving skills/critical thinking	1%	2%	8%	10%	12%

This poses a challenge to universities in the light of employers' assessment that technical skills are generally not interns' best strength (see the section "*Employers love their interns' enthusiasm and work ethic*" in this report).

It also demonstrates that without the critical personal attributes and soft skills required to work successfully in a team environment, graduates are placed at a disadvantage when seeking employment.

When employers don't hire interns, it's usually because there's no suitable role

It's important to understand the factors which stop employers from hiring interns they have worked with. Keeping in mind that many employers are not looking for ongoing staff when they host interns, we can see that 61% of employers often or very often simply don't have an ongoing role available.

However, 44% of employers reported that they very often or often find that interns do not meet the requirements of the available roles.

Only 22% of employers said that interns often or very often lack the right skillset, with 29% saying this had never been a reason for them not to hire an intern they had hosted.

Thinking about the interns you have not employed, which of these would usually apply?



Internships significantly boost perceptions of overall employability

Preparing interns for successful careers is the primary goal of internships, and employers and interns surveyed agree that interns show significant improvement in overall employability after their internship, to a remarkable degree considering the relatively short duration of internships (three months).

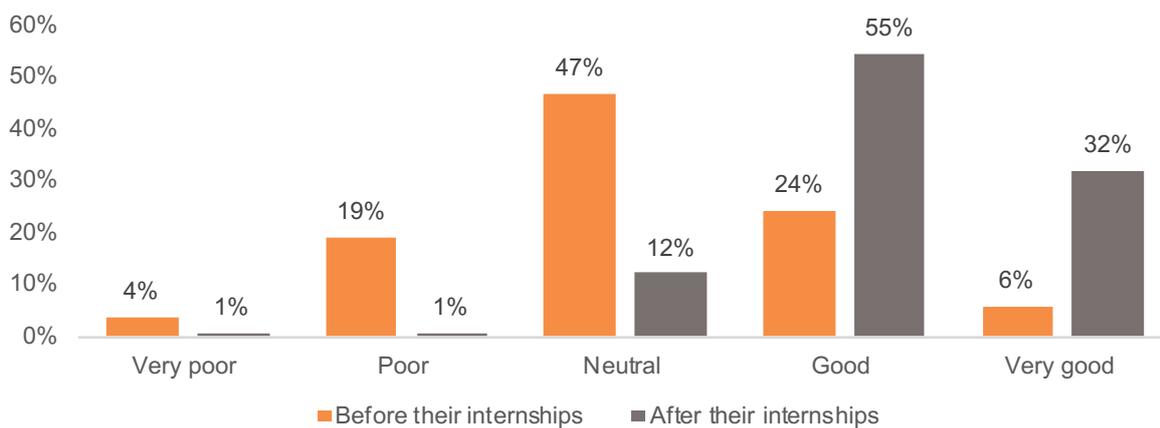
Pre-internship, only 30% of employers rate interns net positively for employability, which rises to 87% post-internship. Post-internship, only 2% of employers surveyed said their interns' employability was poor or very poor.

In comparison, pre-internship, 41% of interns rate their own employability net positive, which rises to 82% post-internship. Only 5% of interns rate their post-internship employability as poor or very poor.

It is interesting to note that before their internships, interns are more bullish about their employability than employers. After their internships, employers are slightly more positive than interns.

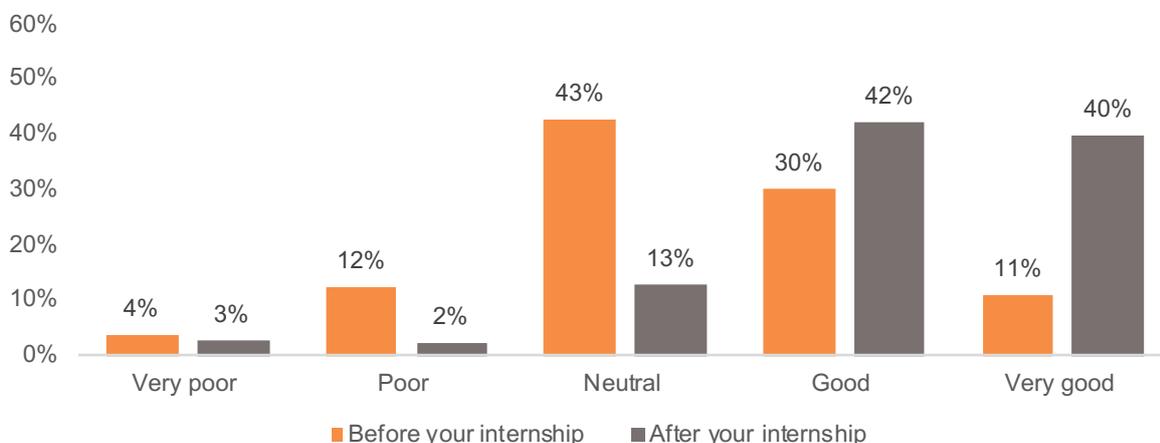
Employer view

Considering interns you have hosted, how would you rate their overall employability, at these stages?



Intern view

How would you rate your overall employability, at these stages?

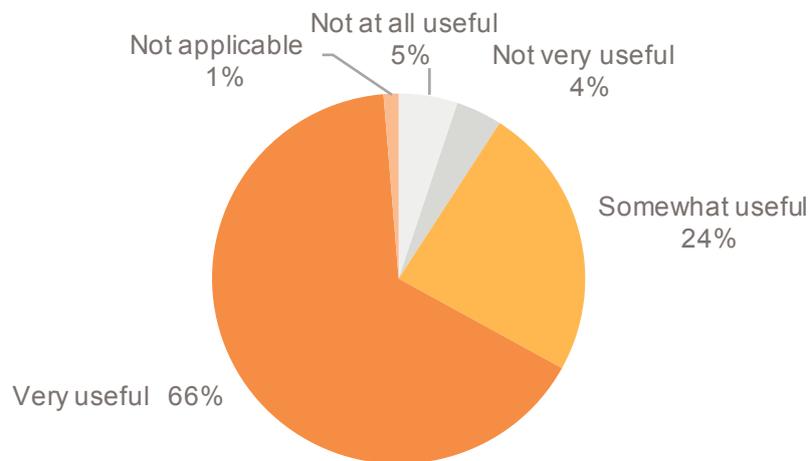


Employer feedback plays an important role in the success of internships

Positive feedback is important at any stage of a person's career, but for international interns on a steep employability learning curve, feedback from their host employers is hugely important.

Fortunately, most interns report that host employers take this responsibility seriously, and are doing a good job of providing useful feedback to enable their interns to develop.

How useful was feedback from your host company in helping your career progress?



Internships benefit employees' understanding of the needs of Australian workplaces

Interns report that their internship successfully developed their skills across a wide range of key employability areas, but particularly in soft skills such as verbal communication, adaptability, team fit and knowing how to make a valuable contribution to a team – these teamwork skills are vitally important to employers, as we have seen. We have also seen that interns do tend to undervalue these softer skills despite recognising that their internship has improved them significantly.

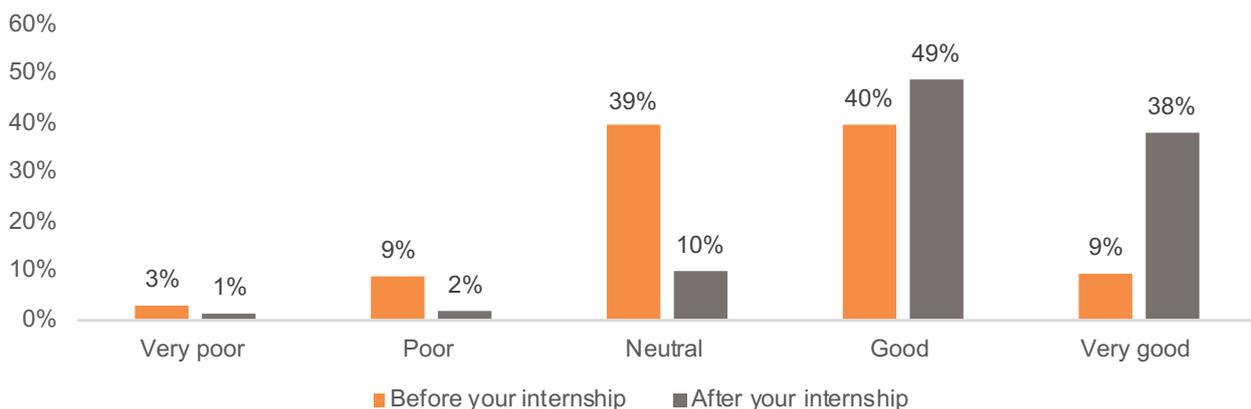
How effective was your internship at developing your skills and understanding in the following areas?



Internships boost interns' understanding of what employers are looking for

One of the key factors in interns' huge boost in employability is the exposure to practical aspects of Australian workplace culture and expectations from employers. This is an area where interns say they have benefited very strongly, and it puts them in a much stronger position when it comes to future job interviews and roles.

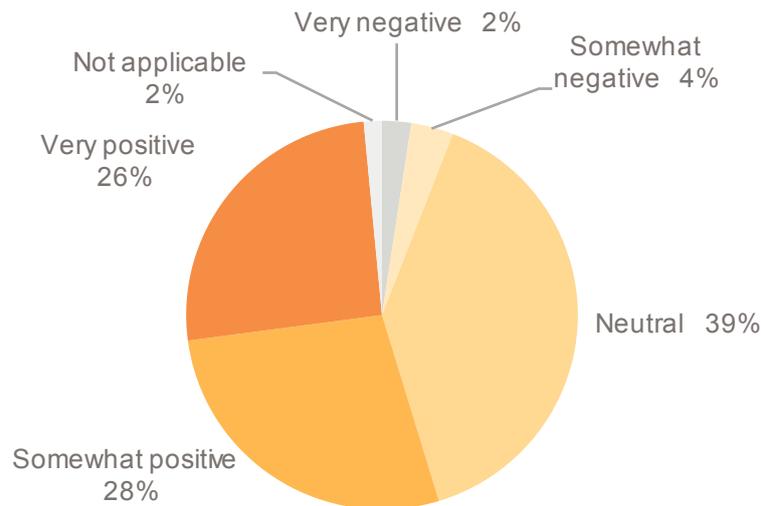
How would you rate your understanding of what Australian employers are looking for in employees, at these stages?



Internships catalyse a positive shift in interns' perceptions of employers

This crucial exposure to and understanding of their host employer also caused a significant boost in interns' positive perceptions of Australian employers. Overall, 76% of interns said their internship made their perception of Australian employers more positive (including 33% who said their views were much more positive). This provides a great platform for positive engagement with future employers, from a position of knowledge, trust and confidence.

Before your internship, how would you rate your interactions with Australian businesses/employers?



We asked interns why they had positive preconceptions of Australian businesses, and most of the comments were based on their previous work experience, often in casual or part-time roles while studying:



Australian employers are open minded, and they are very supportive. If I have any idea or suggestion, they will take it seriously. I enjoy working in such a friendly working environment.

According to my previous experience, I like the Australian style, which is much straightforward, so I don't need to guess what's the meaning.



Most of the negative preconceptions were related to a lack of knowledge:



Before the internship, I had no chance to work in an office, which made me have a little understanding about Australian employers.

Minimal knowledge about workplace communication.

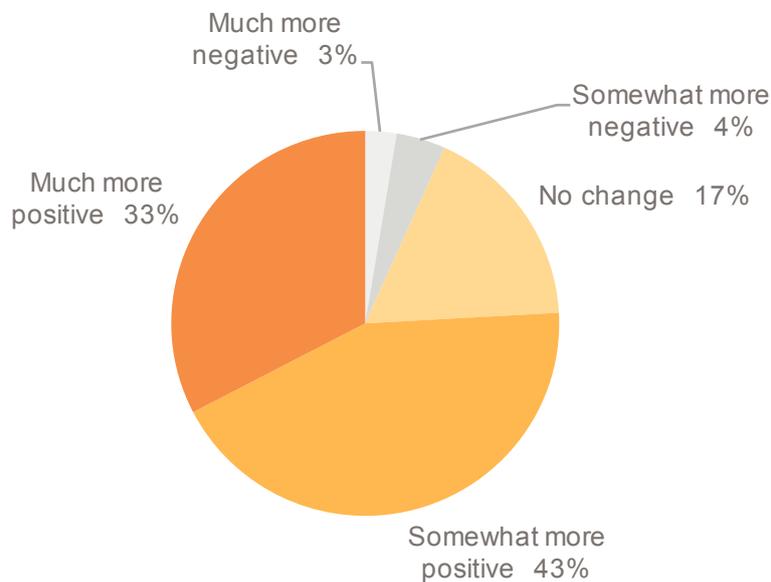
Didn't realise what they looked for in employees and got rejected a lot.

I didn't know the right way to approach and communicate with management.



By exposing interns directly to the reality of Australian workplaces, this first-hand experience leads to a significant positive change in interns' views of Australian employers.

Overall, how has your internship experience changed your perception of Australian businesses/employers?



What caused these changes in perceptions? Many interns commented that they appreciated the straightforward nature of communications within Australian businesses, the focus on fairness, cultural diversity and inclusiveness, willingness to listen to employees' points of view, and recognition of good work.

It is likely that the kinds of businesses that are attracted to international interns are those which value these cultural diversity goals and actively encourage pro-diversity actions and policies, because they understand the benefits of doing so, and international interns are reading these signals and reacting positively to them.

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The team I interned in was very inclusive and supportive. I thought the employer would like to employ someone who already know everything. But after internship, I realised that they also accept fresh people as long as they are eager to learn. On top of that, we always have someone to support us.

Being treated fairly and the acceptance of me despite my race and sexuality. I was treated well and accepted as a part of the team decision making and my opinions are valid and heard.

Before my internship I thought Australian employers would be very strict. However, I found that some of them are not only professional but also easy-going and have a sense of humour.

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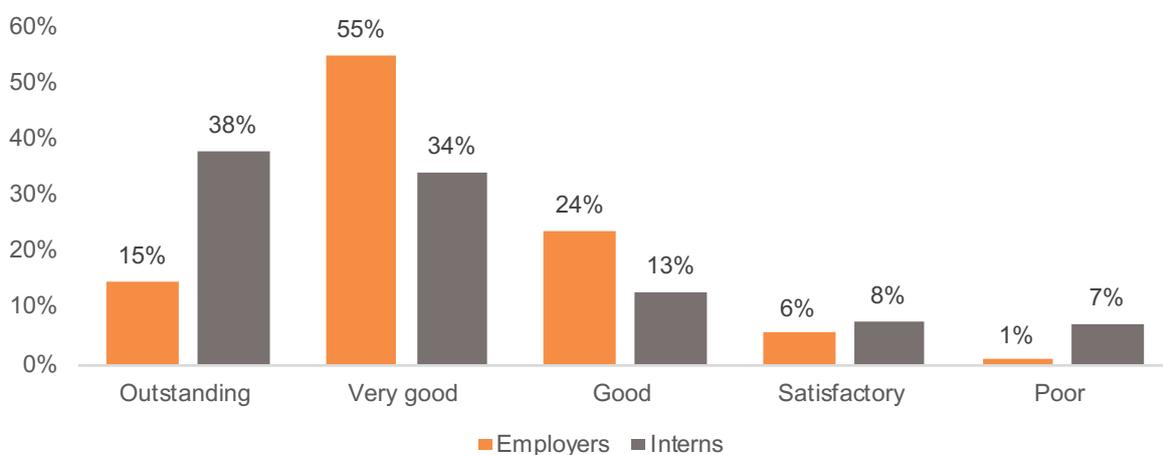


Internships are very rewarding for employers and interns

The two surveys show that overall, both employers and interns get a lot of value from internships, with interns being particularly effusive about the experience.

Critically, anecdotal feedback from both groups reveals that the areas where interns benefit most are: soft skills; teamwork; confidence; understanding of workplace culture and expectations; practical application of technical skills to real work; factors that are highly complementary to the skills and theoretical/technical knowledge base that universities are best placed to deliver.

Overall, how would you rate your experience hosting international student interns/as an intern?



Employer point of view



Give the process a go, there are some great candidates out there who just need an opportunity to break through that first barrier between study and work lives. They bring fresh insights and challenge the status quo in positive ways.

International Interns are excellent, they are very motivated and give their 100%. I would highly recommend you taking an intern.

I would certainly encourage employers to consider international interns. We have experienced conscientious, motivated and skilled interns.



Intern point of view



Helped me gain industry experience and put my academic learning into practical application. Helped me develop new skills with regards to the accounting software and increased my level of overall confidence!

It was an amazing learning experience. Gave me practical knowledge of the job system and what exactly is needed in the job opportunities.

Good experience with proper guidance from my mentor leads to successful completion of job with great achievements and good memories. I participated in all of my day to day activities and had respect, as they consider my view while taking decisions. This builds much more confidence in me.

The exposure to work pressure and team dynamics has changed my professional perception, my values and my performance for the better as these three are the main ingredients that you offer on the table that will eventually make you employable.

I gained valuable industry knowledge in skills such as multitasking, communicating, learning to deal with diversity, and dealing with deadlines are different when we are working for someone else. Open communication was one of the strongest and most apparent skills that I learned during my internship.

I learned new knowledge and how to work in an Australian workplace. The most important thing I learned was how to build a network and it is very important for future jobs. I also built my confidence and problem - solving skills by completing projects with team members.



Employers are motivated by altruism, but they understand the benefits to their business

Employers considering hosting interns have a range of motivations and must weigh up the benefits against the time investment required to successfully host interns. To understand the most important factors motivating employers we asked them to rank their motivations in order of importance.

We found that there is one stand-out reason employers nominate as to why they host interns: to give young people a start in their careers.

This altruistic primary motivation is then bolstered by factors which benefit the business directly: to involve them with a specific project or piece of work; and as a way of engaging with graduate talent and even helping to assesses for future employment potential.

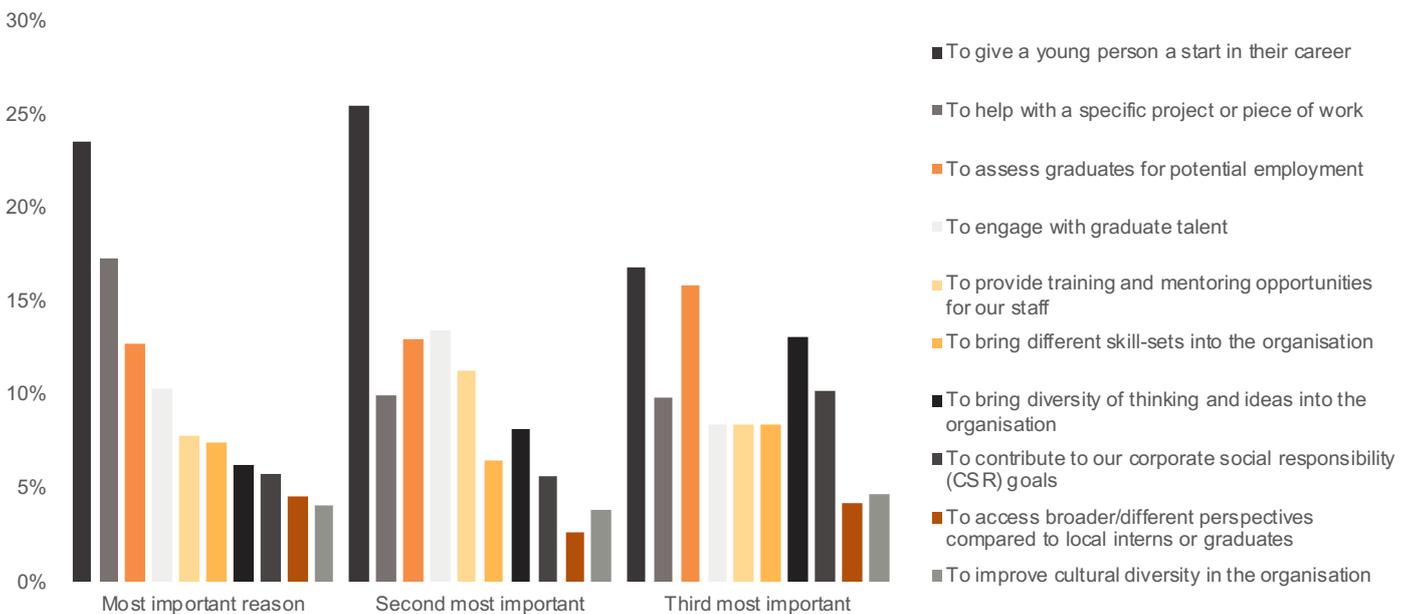


Watching someone who is eager and keen starting their career is a joy! Our interns bring enthusiasm to the working group which is infectious.

Hiring international interns not only bring diversity in culture but they also have knowledge of international markets, helping organisations think in larger perspective. Besides, it also provides an opportunity to our staff to mentor.



What were your company's main motivations for hosting international student interns?



A key underlying theme in anecdotal feedback provided by employers was the need to invest time and effort. The employers who were happiest were the ones who recognised that the internship must be a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties are devoting the appropriate time and commitment.

“

You'll get the most value if you have good value to give back to the intern. For example, an interesting project for them to learn from, as opposed to giving them low level work that doesn't engage them. If you don't have a project running for them... think of one!

You get back what you put in - You do need to spend quality time with the intern but my experience to date has been excellent. Their willingness to learn and pick up tasks is outstanding and our business has found it very valuable.

”



Employers and interns don't always agree on their pre-internship skills

There are some clear gaps between interns' and employers' perceptions of the interns' skills and attributes, with interns tending to over-rate themselves in knowledge of subject matter, problem solving and critical thinking, technical and practical skills, and written communication.

Employers and interns tend to agree with each other on interns' adaptability and ability to contribute to a team.

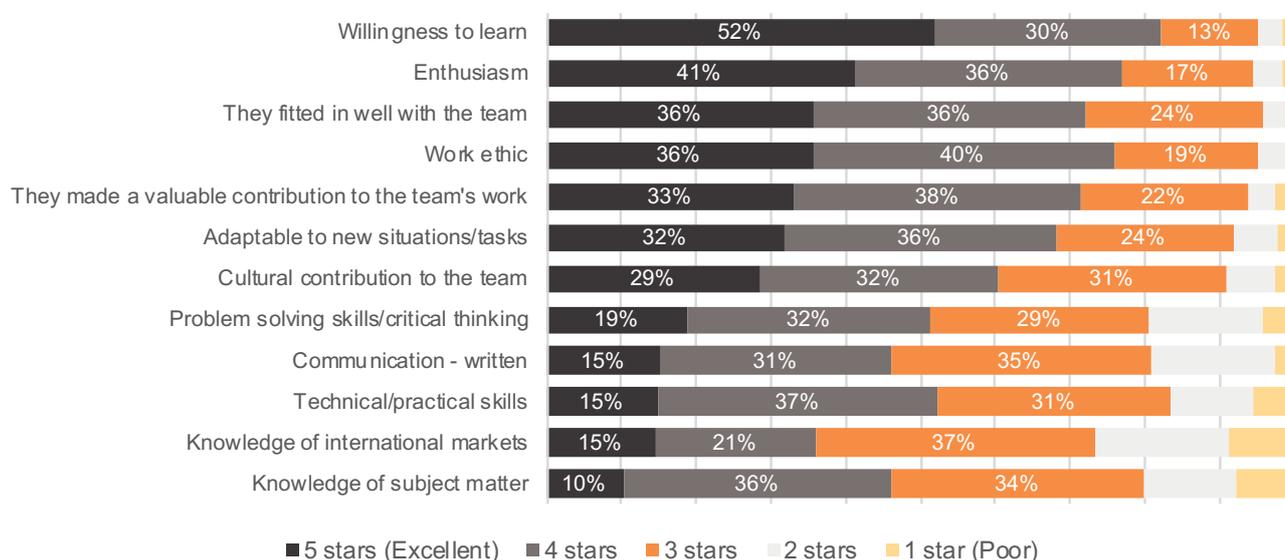
Comparison of employer versus intern skill assessments

		5 stars	4 stars	3 stars	2 stars	1 star
Adaptability	Interns	30%	37%	23%	7%	3%
	Employers	32%	36%	24%	6%	2%
Knowledge of subject matter	Interns	25%	35%	29%	8%	4%
	Employers	10%	36%	34%	12%	8%
Problem solving/critical thinking	Interns	30%	35%	25%	6%	4%
	Employers	19%	32%	29%	15%	4%
Teamwork	Interns	34%	37%	20%	5%	3%
	Employers	33%	38%	22%	4%	3%
Technical/practical skills	Interns	26%	35%	26%	8%	5%
	Employers	15%	37%	31%	11%	6%
Written communication	Interns	32%	34%	23%	7%	4%
	Employers	15%	31%	35%	17%	3%

Employers love their interns' enthusiasm and work ethic

Employers rate international interns most highly for their willingness to learn, enthusiasm, contribution to their teams, and work ethic, with many employers suggesting that these skills are actually more critical to interns' medium-term success than technical skills, even in entry-level technical roles.

Overall, how would you rate interns you have hosted or worked with in the following areas?



Even on the factors employers rate interns less highly on, such as subject matter knowledge, technical and practical skills, and written communication, on balance the perceptions are generally positive with several employers commenting that international interns are no different from local interns or graduates in this respect.

Employers expect that entry-level employees will require some technical and practical training, but soft skills are more difficult for them to assess in an interview situation yet are critical to success in modern workplaces.

The ability to assess soft skills over an extended period is therefore seen as a definite advantage for those employers who are looking to use their international internship program in support of their recruitment tools.



International interns are no different to local interns when it comes to technical skills and knowledge, but they bring in diversity that the local interns cannot bring.

Their soft skills as well as their technical ability is what makes for great interns. Always hire for great soft skills, because most people often code only as well as they communicate.

I would certainly encourage employers to consider international interns. We have experienced conscientious, motivated and skilled interns.



The most successful internships require work on both sides, to benefit both sides

Employers have different reasons for engaging international interns and best practice will vary depending on the goals of individual employers, but feedback from the surveyed employers and interns reveals recurring themes.

Successful international internship programs often combine these elements:

- Time investment in mentoring and training
- Realistic tasks – projects that are meaningful and related to the intern's background and goals.
- Be inclusive - involve interns in team and company activities and meetings, expose them to different parts of the business. Many interns mentioned that they were surprised and delighted to be welcomed into their team and treated like other staff.
- Don't impose norms too rigidly – like any new employee, interns need some time to adjust to company culture, build their confidence and get comfortable in a new environment. Many interns mentioned that they were worried about fitting in, but were pleased to find more flexibility and diversity than they expected.

What would you say to other employers looking to hire international interns?



Most international students have the right technical skills and some have international experience, they should be given an opportunity to step in to Australian work environment. I believe companies should have faith in international students as you will find rare skill sets out of these students.

It is an opportunity for both parties to benefit. However, you must be prepared to invest in the intern, that is train them and allow them to grow in your organisation.

Give the process a go, there are some great candidates out there who just need an opportunity to break through that first barrier between study and work lives. They bring fresh insights and challenge the status quo in positive ways.

It is a great way to see how a potential employee fits your organisation and it also provides a meaningful experience to interns that have not had exposure to a work environment in Australia.

It will help your organisation but only if you spend the time helping the students get started.

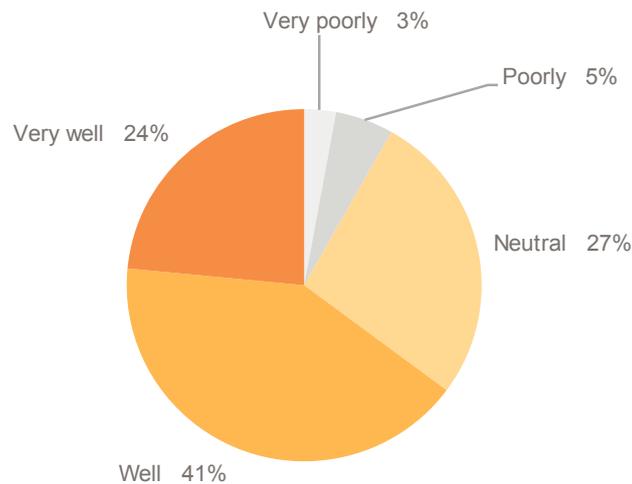


Interns do generally feel that their university studies prepared them well for the workforce

The intern survey asked interns how well their university studies prepared them for the workforce, with a view to understanding how the interns felt, but also seeing how their perspective matched up against that of employers.

Overall, 65% of interns thought their university studies prepared them well (41%) or very well (24%) for the workforce, but we have seen how this self-assessment diverges from employers' views of interns' work-readiness.

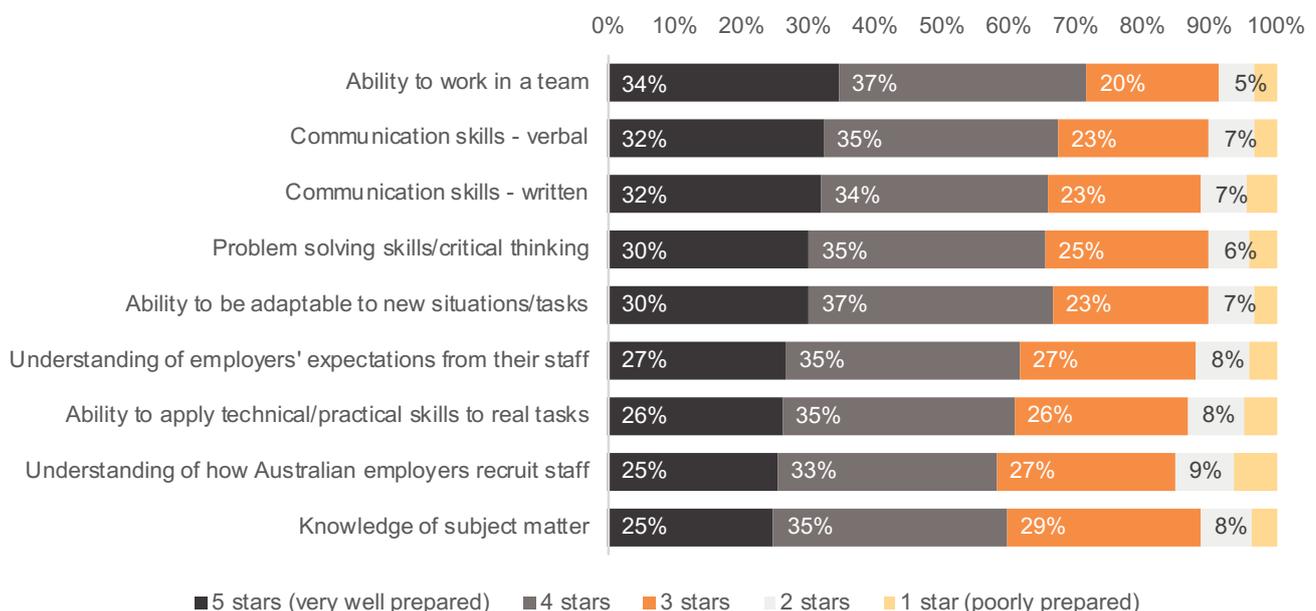
How well did your university course prepare you for the reality of working in an Australian business?



Interns felt they were best-prepared in their ability to work in a team, communication skills, and problem solving/critical thinking skills.

They felt less well-prepared in their ability to apply their skills to practical tasks, and in terms of their understanding of how Australian employers recruit: areas where direct experience through an internship can deliver a complementary benefit.

Before your internship, how well-prepared for work in an Australian business were you, in the following areas?



Universities must deliver graduates with foundational technical skills

What this means for universities is that employers are still not completely satisfied that graduates are work-ready straight out of university, and neither are all interns.

While the personal attributes of international interns are well regarded, particularly their willingness to learn, enthusiasm, work ethic, and teamwork, there is some room for improvement in knowledge of subject matter, technical skills, and their practical application.

These should be the core competencies of universities, they are the most important success factor for graduate employability, and yet employers rate them well below their interns' other attributes. The proper role of internships is then to develop these core competencies in an applied context, familiarise the interns with the expectations of employers and bolster their soft skills.

According to the 2018 QS Enrolment Solutions International Student Survey¹, the most important factor when international students are choosing a course is that it leads to their chosen career, and employability remains a key driver of international student choices of university, city and country. As a practice which significantly improves employability, internships are rapidly becoming a core component of many degrees aimed at international students, and these findings show their importance.

1 QS Enrolment Solutions: www.internationalstudentsurvey.com



About this research

Readygrad commissioned QS Enrolment Solutions to conduct two online surveys of participants who had engaged with internships facilitated by Readygrad. There were separate surveys for employers and interns, conducted over a two-week period between August and September 2018.

The employer survey received 285 responses (210 complete and 75 partial) from individuals whose company had hosted an intern within the last three years, and who had personally worked with interns as a hiring manager, mentor or team member.

The intern survey received 541 responses (340 complete and 201 partial) from international interns who had completed a recognised training program with an internship component with Readygrad in the last three years.

About Readygrad

Revolutionising Graduate Employability

Readygrad is part of Gradability, Australia's largest dedicated graduate employability specialist and industry leader. We have a track record of changing more than 25,000 lives, by revolutionising the employment landscape for international and domestic graduates through learning and industry connections.

Our beginnings date back to 2005. Working in the industry as recruiters we saw that there was a big gap between technical education and the work readiness of graduates – and no one was supporting them in this.

So we set out to solve this problem, combining our expertise in graduate recruitment and development, training, professional services and businesses, to enhance student employability through industry placement programs, workshops and training, and online employability programs.

We are passionate about helping graduates gain an unfair advantage in the competitive employment market and partner with industry, university and education partners across Australia and overseas who share the same vision.

Find out more about our programs and partnership opportunities at www.readygrad.com.au

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About QS Enrolment Solutions

QS Enrolment Solutions is a global market leader for research and understanding of international and domestic students.

Each year we deal with hundreds of thousands of students globally, giving us a unique insight into the student recruitment market. Our research, strategy, enquiry, admissions and enrolment services mean we have hands-on experience of the obstacles and opportunities within specific countries and regions, helping clients mitigate risk, benefit from our existing relationships, and build sustainable recruitment strategies in an increasingly complex marketplace.

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Thank You

Motivations, perceptions
and employability:

Why companies hire international students