

THE IMPACT OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND ENGAGEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY: OPAIC ALUMNI 2019

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ABSTRACT

The high level of dissatisfaction from an employability perspective and decreasing employment rate of international students in New Zealand is an increasing concern for higher education providers and their students. Education New Zealand research in 2019 and Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus Graduate Outcome report 2019 support these findings. It highlights a need for a strategy to develop and enhance international student employability skills.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the connection between the graduates' employability and their participation in extracurricular activities (ECAs) and the outcomes from their involvement. This study explored the views of Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus alumni who graduated in 2019 from various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Using descriptive and thematic analysis, this study analysed the impact of extracurricular activities on Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus graduates' employability. Convenience sampling was used for data collection. A total of 112 participants completed an online survey, and 7 participants undertook semi-structured interviews. The data collected from the survey identified the level of engagement in different extracurricular activities, the motivations to participate, the barriers to participation, the development of soft skills from graduates' perspective, and employment rates. Using the descriptive analysis, data was compared and correlated. The data collected from interviews provided an in-depth understanding of how international students perceive the benefits of engagement in extracurricular activities and shared their outcomes. Recommendations were provided for future and current international students and to Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus as a facilitator of employability skills development based on the findings.

Keywords: employability; international students employability; extracurricular activities participation; transferable skills; engagement in extracurricular activities; soft skills development;

INTRODUCTION

Understanding that return on investment (ROI) is an essential part of the decision-making process of international students, institutions worldwide make employability a part of their brand, according to Berquist et al. (2019). Hence the international education market has to change its policy to let students work during studies and after graduation (Berquist et al., 2019). New Zealand (NZ) is not an exception. New changes in work rights for international students make NZ a very attractive place to study amongst English-speaking countries like Australia, Canada, the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom etc. (Berquist et al., 2019).

However, it creates pressure for higher education (HE) providers in NZ to supply employable graduates to

contribute to national and global economic growth (Small, Shacklock, & Marchant, 2018).

As part of the International Education Strategy 2013-2030 (Education New Zealand, 2019), the Education New Zealand agency runs an international student experience survey to understand the whole journey of the international student in NZ. Notably, the results showed overall satisfaction apart from the employment experience (Nielsen Company, 2020). It was discouraging to discover from the survey results that the challenge was finding a job related to an academic degree and finding part-time options while studying (Nielsen Company, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to understand employability to a greater extent.

Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus (OPAIC), as one of the leading tertiary providers of international education in NZ, focuses on student employability, and its vision "NZ's most employable graduates" gives hope to students (Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus, 2020-a). However, one of the recent OPAIC, "Graduate Outcome Reports" showed a 13% drop in employment rates of alumni 2019 in comparison with alumni 2018 (Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus, 2020-a). Therefore, this increases the concern about employability and obligates OPAIC to look at this issue from different perspectives.

In 2020 the situation had dramatically changed all over the world due to Corona Virus Disease- 19 (COVID-19) and created ambiguity in the labour market, particularly for international students (New Zealand Government, 2020). Many industries in NZ have gone through restructure, redundancies, or, even worse, bankruptcy, and hence this created a lot of competition in the job market for international students and required them to stand out from an employability point of view New Zealand Government (2020). Thus, it is a signal for all stakeholders (NZ Government, employers, international students, tertiary education providers) to focus on employability strategy development.

This study will focus on understanding the extracurricular activities (ECA) phenomenon, its benefits, and the enhancement of OPAIC international students' employability.

STUDY AIM AND QUESTIONS

The employability of the graduates is the biggest concern of many tertiary education providers around the world (Berquist et al., 2019; Pais, 2012; Small, Shacklock, Marchant, et al., 2018). Hence, OPAIC needs to improve employability skills and make the transition of graduates into the labour market smoother.

Focusing on OPAIC alumni who graduated in 2019 this study intends to determine if there is a connection between participation in ECAs and employability skills development from the graduates' point of view.

The study aims to review current literature to identify potential benefits from engagement in ECAs. Secondly, the analysis of 2019 alumni responses to a quantitative survey was conducted to determine if there was a correlation between the ability to get a full-time job related to an OPAIC degree and the proactive participation in extracurricular activities of graduates. Moreover, the researchers wanted to find out if graduates were aware of the benefits from engagement in ECAs during their studies, if they participated in ECAs, how often, and the reasons for not engaging.

Finally, it aimed to analyse the data collected during interviews with graduates who shared their perspectives on the effectiveness of being proactive and engaged in ECAs.

Study question:

How does participation in extracurricular activities impact OPAIC graduates' employability?

"Employable graduates" are in the interest of all OPAIC stakeholders: NZ Government, employers, international students and their families, tertiary education providers (Berquist et al., 2019). Hence, this study provides insights on employability in general and OPAIC 2019 graduates' employability in particular;

discuss the opportunities for international students to be proactive and engage in ECAs. The research will be helpful for the OPAIC Employability Team and other policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students Employability

What is employability?

One of the most popular definitions of employability is “a set of achievements – skills, understandings, and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and succeed in their chosen occupations, and which thus benefits themselves, the workforce, community, and economy” (Yorke, 2006, p. 8). Later in the literature, this definition is reiterated with some minor additions. However, even though definitions by researchers are similar, misunderstanding still exists in the labour market around the world regarding employability. Tymon (2013) assumes that any misunderstanding about employability is caused by different perspectives, for instance, student, HE provider and employer.

Employers

Several studies that carried out in the last decade to understand employer’s expectations from graduates showed that the academic degree is not the number one but an additional requirement to what employers want to see when hiring graduates (Lau et al., 2014; Stevenson & Clegg, 2011; Støren & Aamodt, 2010).

Previous research suggests interviews with employers demonstrate consistency and similarity in the expectations from graduates (see Table 1). However, Tymon (2013) stated an obvious gap between employers’ expectations and satisfaction levels. For example, communication capability was ranked as the main skill in demand, taking first place in the list, but rated as 16th when it comes to employers’ satisfaction (Tymon, 2013). Therefore, this gap is a concern for the work-readiness of graduates.

Table 1. Employers’ Preferences of Graduates’ Employability Skills

GRADUATES SKILLS AND CAPABILITIES	RESEARCH
Effective communication (verbally and in writing). Work in teams. Cultural competence. Effective interpersonal behaviour. Solving problems	Learner Capability Framework (Otago Polytechnic, 2019)
Self-confidence; Awareness about personality. Effective communication;	(Thompson et al., 2013)
Communication skills. Willingness to learn. Team-working. Interpersonal skills. Self-awareness. Networking skills	(Jones, 2013; Yorke, 2006)
Communication. Teamwork. Integrity. Flexibility. Commitment.	(Tymon, 2013)

GRADUATES SKILLS AND CAPABILITIES	RESEARCH
Soft skills. Problem-solving skills. Functional skills. Pre-graduate experience. Academic reputation.	(Chhinzer & Russo, 2018)

International Students and Graduates

Many studies about international students' employability show that an academic degree itself is not a guarantee to obtaining a job for graduates (Yorke, 2006), curricula do not include the proper employability skills development (Thompson et al., 2013), and international students try to focus only on course completion, in some cases with high grades, to get the technical skills (Gribble, 2015). Jones (2013) stated that the Ministry of Education in Australia conducted a survey and found that international students underrate employability skills, leading to conflict in understanding who the employable graduate is between international graduates and employers.

The literature analysis identified the possible barriers for international graduates to enter the job market, and the results are presented below (see Table 2).

Table 2. Barriers to Transition into the Job Market for International Graduates

BARRIERS	RESEARCH
Being new in the country, the international student does not know the industry insights to navigate the market and stand out in competition with local graduates.	(Clark et al., 2015)
NZ is a popular study destination. Hence, the competition is very high because there are a lot of international students.	(Matlay & Rae, 2007)
Local employers are prejudiced about international students' knowledge of workplace culture and cross-cultural communications.	(Jackson, 2017)
The process of gaining soft skills during studies is not valued by international students.	(Gribble, 2015)
International students do not focus on understanding the local workplace culture and the approach to job search.	(Nguyen & Hartz, 2020)
Employers have many negative perceptions, including weak language skills, absence of local work experience, poor professional networks.	(Berquist et al., 2019)

Despite all the barriers to transition mentioned in Table 2, there is also a positive trend in international graduates' experience. The literature investigation revealed that the employers appreciate the resilience, the ability to speak more than one language, the skill to build networks from scratch, open-minded way of thinking, soft skills that lead to intercultural awareness, and the capability of self-development (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Huang & Turner, 2018; Jones, 2013; Nilsson, 2019).

Higher Education Providers

There is a popular view that HE providers must develop students' employability and better prepare them to enter the labour force with upgraded soft skills (Olivares et al., 2019; Yorke, 2006). Tymon (2013) found that HE providers are already under pressure marketing-wise to stay profitable. This and other challenges make it difficult to stay focused on the employability of the graduates.

There is the view that international students should be curious and proactive, take steps forward and stand out (Huang & Turner, 2018; Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Consequently, it leads to the question of what can international students do to stand out and develop soft skills?

Many studies found that participation in ECAs is connected to graduates employability and is an essential part of the "stand out" strategy (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017). Akinrinmade and Ayeni (2017) also found that employers see the positive outcomes for international graduate's employability from the engagement in ECAs.

Therefore, this study explores how ECAs can benefit international graduates and enhance their employability.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

ECAs are activities outside the classroom that are not compulsory, and students do not get grades for them (Tran, 2017).

Although there is minimal research on the impact of ECAs on students, with less information on international students, compared to the academic degree effectiveness, we found that there is a positive outcome from ECAs engagement for students (Clark et al., 2015; Lau et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). For example, the research by Tran (2017) about international Asian students studying overseas reports that participation in ECAs helped them to adapt in a new country, improve language and communication skills. Nilsson (2019) also stated that in order to overcome homesickness and improve well-being, it is essential for international students to be connected to local groups, clubs, or communities. Table 3 below lists ECAs and reported benefits in different literature.

Table 3. Benefits from Engaging in Different Extracurricular Activities

ECA TYPE	BENEFITS	SOURCE
Networking and Industry events	- An understanding of the new environment and better adaptation.	(Fu, 2021)
	- Depending on the level and quality of engagement with networks, showed higher rates of job offers and smooth transition to employment.	(Van Hoye et al., 2013)
	- Getting knowledge, establish collaborations.	(Mitchell et al., 2016)
	- Raise awareness about personal branding and creating a reputation.	(Stam, 2010)
	- Enlarging professional networks.	
	- Learning industry insights and trends.	

ECA TYPE	BENEFITS	SOURCE
Volunteering	– Meet new like-minded people and possibly make friends.	(Fu, 2021)
	– Receive a recommendation letter or a certificate to add to your Curriculum Vitae (CV).	(Lau et al., 2014)
	– Improving personal confidence and well-being by helping or leading others.	(Kamerade & Paine, 2014)
	– Enhancing employability by learning how to work in teams, how to create networks. Practice the English language. – Escape loneliness.	
Internship	– Improving time management, the ability to express yourself better, leadership skills, teamwork skills, communication in English, tolerance to the diverse environment, positive attitude to future work, willingness to learn, resilience, the understanding of what a future step in career can be.	(Chen et al., 2018)
	– Getting local work experience, chance to apply academic knowledge and technical skills.	(O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017)
	– Understanding the field of interest and future career planning.	
	– Making international students stand out and more marketable.	
	– Enlarge professional network and receive valuable recommendations.	
	– Possible transition to a job. – Gain confidence.	
Part-time job	– Acquisition of local work experience.	(Ylonen, 2012)
	– Getting knowledge of the job market.	(Education New Zealand, 2021)
	– Development of teamwork, communication, English language, time management, and interpersonal skills.	
Employability workshops and career guidance services	– Empowerment and encouragement of being proactive and believe in themselves.	(Robertson, 2013)
	– Learn how to set career goals.	
	– Getting work-ready by learning how to job search, how to prepare a CV and cover letters, how to prepare for an interview etc.	
	– Understand the local market and identify tools to become more employable.	
Student communities (Buddy or Student Ambassador Program)	– Understanding how the local organisation works.	(Lundberg et al., 2018)
	– Improvement of teamwork skills.	(Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017)
	– Intercultural communication skills and awareness.	
	– Leadership skills improvement as well as problem-solving.	(Nilsson, 2019)
	– Gaining confidence from coaching newcomers.	
	– Connecting with international students from other countries to learning about the new culture. – Improvement of communication, coaching, flexibility, teamwork skills.	(Ylonen, 2012)

Although the research mentioned above found the benefits of participation in different ECAs that can enhance the employability of international students, there is another study that shows the opposite results. It was found that there is no considerable enhancement of students' employability after participation in ECAs (Lau et al., 2014).

Reasons for Low Engagement

It was observed that low engagement in ECAs might be caused by reasons such as:

Current students do not value participation because they consider it a waste of time and do not believe that it can improve employability (Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017).

Students struggle to relate ECAs to gaining employability skills; Due to full-time studies and part-time jobs, they do not have time to participate. In cases where activities do not include active participation for students, they do not seem interested (Tran, 2017).

Therefore, there is a need to start promoting proactiveness and raise awareness of ECAs benefits as soon as students begin their studies to help develop career planning strategies and see the bigger picture (Clark et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

To investigate how ECAs enhance graduates employability, this exploratory study was conducted to perform descriptive analysis with a focus on OPAIC alumni 2019. Firstly, to measure the employability of alumni, this study was based on the magic bullet model suggested by Harvey (2001) where the graduates were called employable when they obtained full-time employment within the specified period of time (six months) after graduation, and this employment was connected to their academic degree. Moreover, this model implies that there is an impact of HE on employability skills development. In this study, the job relevance to the academic degree is based on the graduates' perception.

Secondly, to understand if employability was enhanced by participation in ECAs or not, it is necessary to investigate the factors responsible for the enhancement. For example, the researchers focused on how proactive OPAIC international students were during their studies in 2019 in terms of ECAs participation and correlates it to the length of the job search period until getting employed.

The study used a mixed-method approach that was conducted to collect primary qualitative and quantitative data (Rudestam & Newton, 2014). To minimise bias, the researchers used methodological triangulations to enrich the data by including several options for collecting it, such as online surveys and semi-structured interviews (Shareia, 2016).

The researchers chose the year 2019 for the study on purpose to provide enough time for graduates to find employment, get as much reliable information based on recollection of the events, and exclude COVID-19 conditions that occurred in 2020 around the world.

Sample of Participants

For this study, the researchers targeted any international student of any age, gender, nationality, and programme completion who finished studies at OPAIC in 2019 to collect data quickly, which is considered convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016).

The researchers contacted the OPAIC Registry and collected information indicating 651 international students graduated from OPAIC with various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in 2019. Table 4 below represents the response rate for different programmes.

Table 4. International Student 2019 Population and Sample By Programme

OPAIC PROGRAMME	2019 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TOTAL	PARTICIPANTS (FINISHED)	% RESPONSE RATE
Graduate Diploma in Applied Management	252	44	17%
Graduate Diploma in Sales and Marketing	27	7	26%
Graduate Diploma in Hotel Management	48	10	21%
Bachelor of Applied Management	27	2	7%
Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Management	137	24	18%
Master in Applied Management	54	13	24%
Master of Professional Practice	8	1	13%
Graduate Diploma in Information Technology	53	5	9%
Bachelor of Construction (Quantity Surveying)	6	1	17%
Diploma in Construction	36	4	11%
Postgraduate Certificate in Applied Management	3	1	33%
TOTAL	651	112	17%

Initially, this study followed the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For example, data must include only OPAIC international students; who graduated in 2019; who studied undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; stayed in NZ after graduation intending to find employment as soon as possible. The data excluded any students who did not give consent; took a break after studies, and went for holidays (back to their home country), or who pursued further study. This exclusion criterion was based on the magic bullet model, focusing on graduates searching for a job immediately after graduation and were employed within six months.

DATA COLLECTION

The link to the anonymous online survey was sent through Qualtrics to 651 graduates on December 15, 2020.

The online survey was planned to be active for two weeks. However, due to the timing at the end of the year, Christmas and New Year holidays, and not very high response rate, the survey remained active till January 31, 2021. During this time, three reminders were sent only to those who had not completed the survey. One-hundred and eighty surveys were started, 144 surveys were recorded (31 uncompleted responses were excluded), 113 surveys were finished (completion rate 63%, response rate 17%), and nine emails bounced back.

The survey was finished by 113 graduates, while one of them did not consent. Hence, 112 participants completed the online survey and were offered to participate in semi-structured interviews over the phone, Microsoft Teams, or face-to-face. Twenty-six participants agreed to participate in the interview and sent their contact details for future communications.

ETHICS

This study was performed in accordance with the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee (OPREC) guidance. It was review and approved by OPREC on October 6, 2020 (AIC67).

DATA ANALYSIS

Questionnaire

The raw data was sorted in Qualtrics. With the help of the metadata function, the researchers included only those participants who completed the survey (n=112). The researchers downloaded the original data from Qualtrics in two formats for use in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. The data were analysed using descriptive, correlation, and regression analysis in Excel. Moreover, data were compared in SPSS through the cross-tabulation function.

Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews were automatically transcribed through the Microsoft Stream. The researchers reviewed and listened to the voice recorders and made edits manually in each transcription.

For qualitative data analysis collected from semi-structured interviews (n=7), the researchers used the six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

LIMITATIONS

Firstly, the collection of data during the Christmas and New Year holidays was considered a limitation as it could be the reason for the lower response rate. Secondly, the recollection of some events was challenging for some. As a result, some participants did not provide the full picture of ECAs participation in the survey and remembered some of those during the interview. Hence the suggestion for future research is to target participants who completed their studies no later than six months before data collection.

Thirdly, due to time limitations, the researchers interviewed only seven out of 26 graduates who expressed interest.

FINDINGS

This section will split findings into two parts:

1. descriptive analysis of quantitative data collected through an online questionnaire.
2. thematic analysis of qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews.

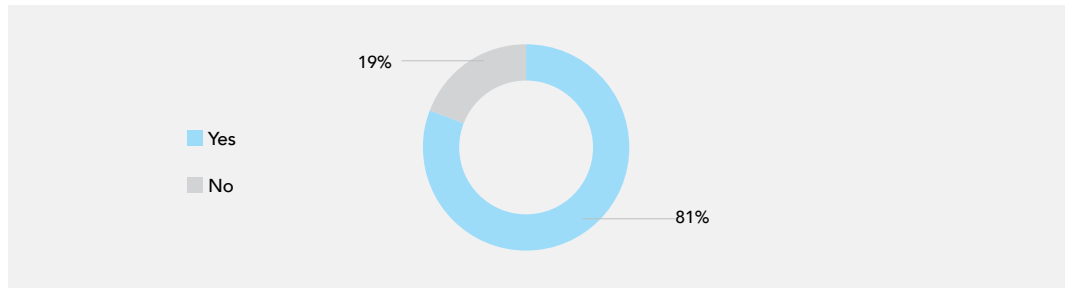
Questionnaire

The survey was completed by 112 participants. The analysis was limited to alumni 2019 who had an intention to seek employment in NZ immediately after graduation. Therefore, two questions in the survey excluded two categories of participants:

1. Participants who returned home after graduation – 20% (22 graduates).
2. Participants who pursued further education – 10% (nine graduates).

Initially, the survey was designed to exclude those who did not find a full-time job after graduation. For those participants who answered No it was the end of the survey. There were four participants under this condition excluded. However, it was not possible to see their participation level in ECAs. Hence, display logic was replaced by skip logic for the rest of the participants. Therefore, Figure 1 represents the participants who answered the question, "Have you found at least 1 full-time job since you graduated?". In response, 66 participants found a full-time job, and 15 participants did not find a full-time job (Mean (M)=1.19; Standard Deviation (SD)=0.39), as shown below:

Figure 1. Employment Status of Alumni 2019 After Graduation

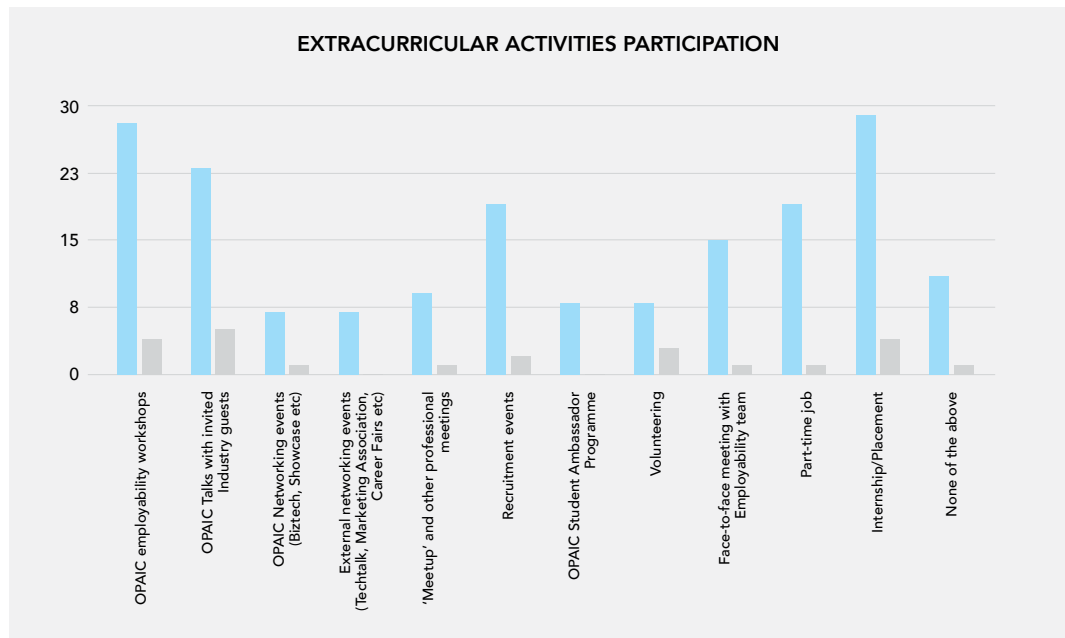


Extracurricular Activities

For those who responded to this survey, employment status was not correlated to the higher number of ECA participants participated in, correlation coefficient (r)=0.06, which can be considered a small effect. There was no correlation found between employment status and the higher number of various ECAs participants participated, with r =0.18, which is considered a small effect.

However, when comparing the participation in ECAs for those who found a full-time job and those who did not, it shows that those who found a full-time job were more proactive (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Comparison of Participation in Extracurricular Activities for those Graduates Who Did and Did Not Find a Full-time Job After Graduation



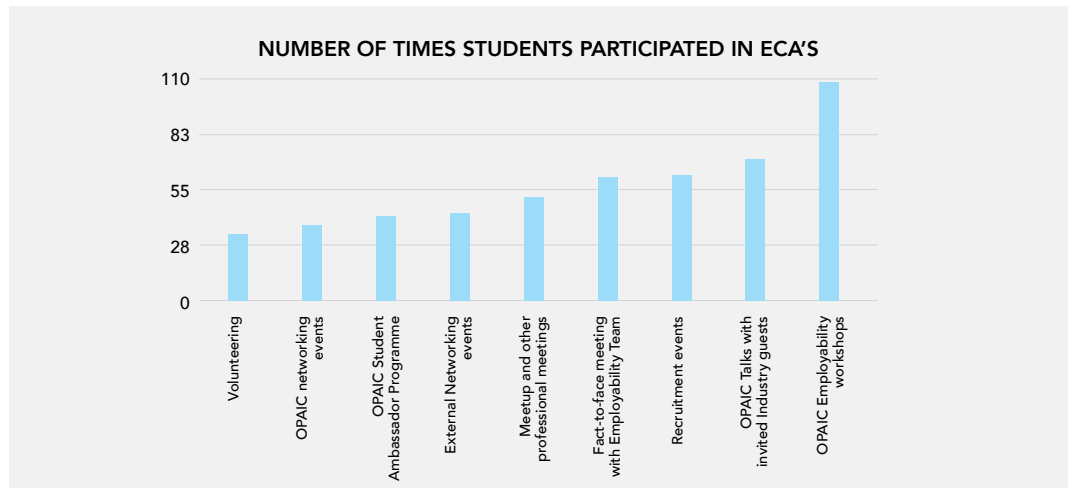
When participants were asked how many times they participated in each activity, they had to tick from options None, 1-3 times, 3-5 times, more than five times for each activity. Table 5 shows the percentage of the graduates' responses ($n=65$) with M and SD (SD) for each variable.

Table 5. Number of Times Graduates Took Part in Each Extracurricular Activity During Their Studies (n=65)

QUESTION	NONE	1-3 TIMES	3-5 TIMES	MORE THAN 5 TIMES	MEAN FOR CATEGORY (FROM 1 TO 4)	STD DEVIATION FOR CATEGORY (FROM 1 TO 4)
OPAIC employability workshops	26.15%	56.92%	15.38%	1.54%	1.92	0.69
OPAIC talks with invited Industry guests	49.23%	46.15%	3.08%	1.54%	1.57	0.63
OPAIC networking events (Biztech, Showcase etc)	73.85%	21.54%	4.62%	0.00%	1.31	0.55
External networking events (Techtalk, Marketing Association, Career Fairs etc)	72.31%	18.46%	7.69%	1.54%	1.38	0.69
Meetup and other professional meetings	64.62%	29.23%	4.62%	1.54%	1.43	0.66
Recruitment events	55.38%	38.46%	6.15%	0.00%	1.51	0.61
OPAIC Student Ambassador Programme	75.38%	15.38%	3.08%	6.15%	1.4	0.82
Volunteering Conservation Volunteers New Zealand (Auckland (CVNZ), Cancer Society, Auckland City Mission, Red Cross etc)	78.46%	15.38%	4.62%	1.54%	1.29	0.63
Face-to-face meeting with the Employability Team	60.00%	29.23%	7.69%	3.08%	1.54	0.77

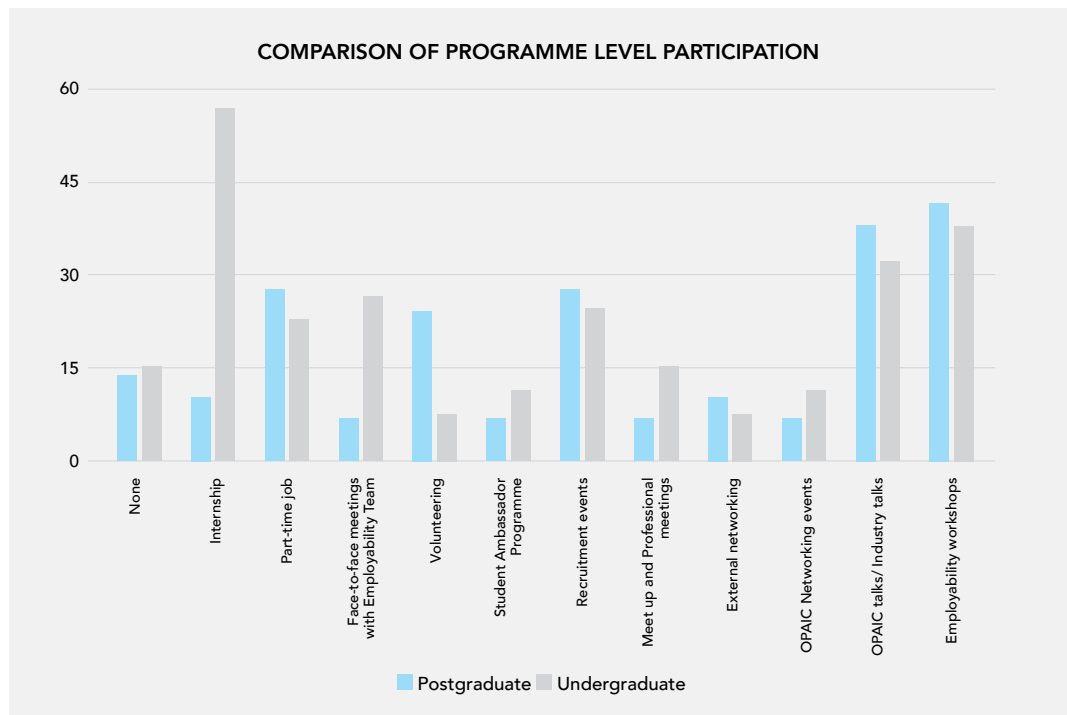
This data is presented graphically in Figure 3 and reports that the top three attended activities were OPAIC employability workshops, OPAIC talks with invited industry guests, and recruitment events. The least attended was the volunteering activity.

Figure 3. Comparison of the Number of Times Graduates Took Part in Each Extracurricular Activities During Their Studies



Crosstab analysis was used in SPSS to compare the level of participation in ECAs between two groups: undergraduate (n=53 = 100%) and postgraduate (n=29 = 100%). According to the data collected, it is not obvious if the undergraduate group was more proactive than the postgraduate or vice versa. However, it can be seen in Figure 4 that more undergraduate students were participating in meetups and other professional meetings, attending OPAIC networking events, Student Ambassador Programme, meeting with the Employability team and completing internships. Postgraduate students were more interested in Volunteering, attending OPAIC employability workshops, meeting with industry guests, and recruitment events.

Figure 4. Comparison Between Postgraduate and Undergraduate (n=81) Level of Participation in Extracurricular Activities During Their Studies.

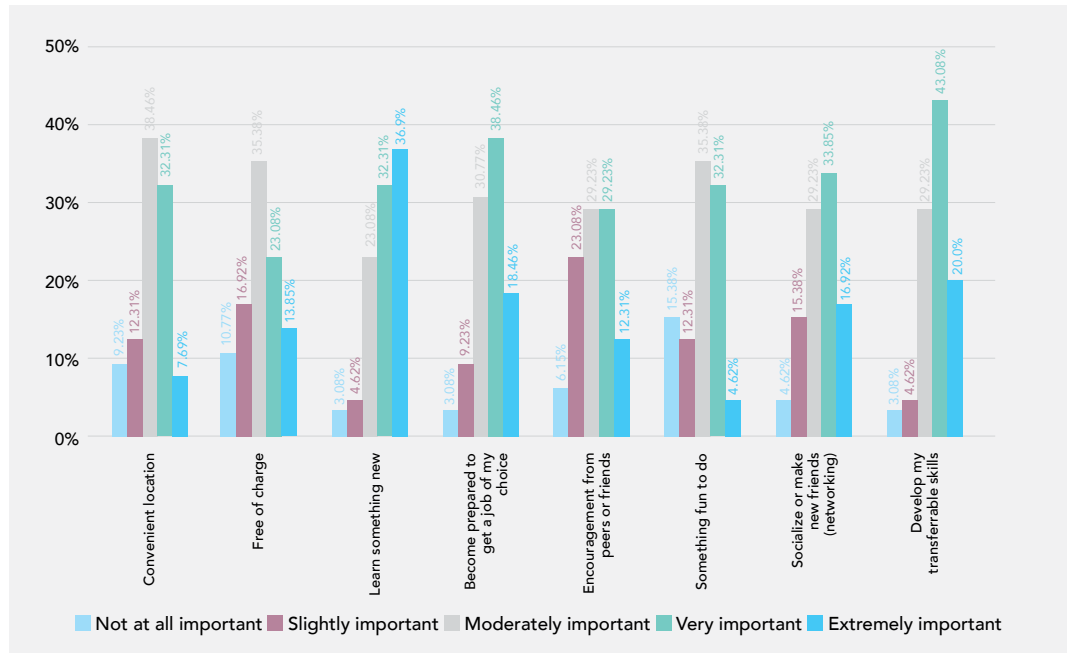


The alumni named the type of active engagement they demonstrated while participating in ECAs like presented (on the stage, in the room, etc) (n=18), met and talked to one or more people (n=35), exchanged contact details (business cards, LinkedIn, emails, etc) with professionals (n=18), asked questions based on the topic of the activity (asked facilitator, guest speaker, presenter) (n=19), participated in the discussion (n=21), completed the required tasks (n=20), lead a project (n=11), received recommendation letter/certificate after completion (n=11).

The top five factors that motivated students to participate in ECAs were:

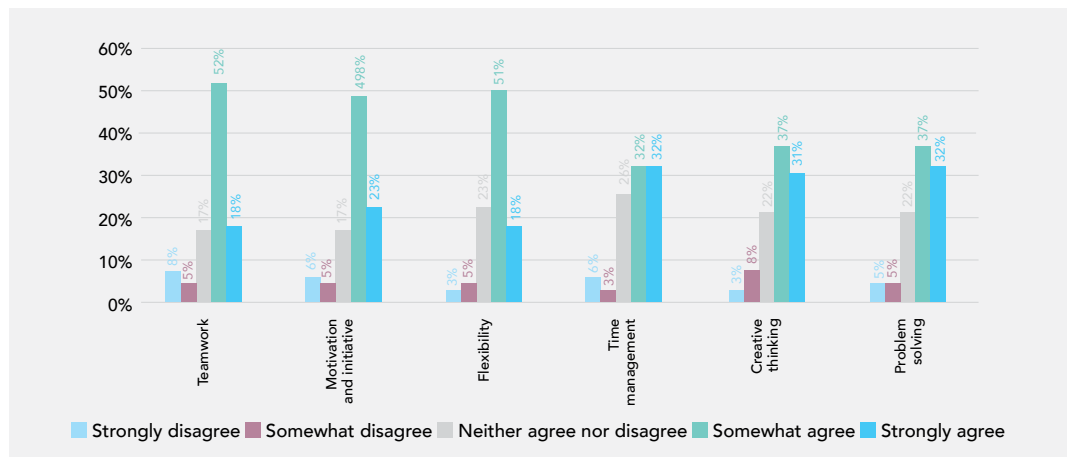
“something fun to do” was not at all an important factor (15%, M=2.98, SD=1.12); “encouragement from peers or friends” was slightly important factor (23%, M=3.18, SD=1.11); “convenient location” was a moderately important factor (38%, M=3.17, SD=1.05); “develop transferable skills” was a very important factor (43%, M=3.72, SD=0.94) and “learn something new” was an extremely important factor (37%, M=3.95, SD=1.03) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. The Importance of Factors That Motivated Students to Participate in Any of the Extracurricular Activities During Their Studies.



Moreover, alumni reported that many transferable skills were developed through participation in ECAs from their perception (n=65), mostly participants Somewhat Agreed that they developed Teamwork (52%, M=3.69, SD=1.07), Flexibility (50%, M=3.77, SD =0.91), and Motivation and Initiative (49%, M=3.78, SD =1.05) (see Figure 6). It can be concluded that most of the participants who got to this question were aware of the transferrable soft skills they developed through ECAs participation. Hence, participation in ECAs has a positive impact on their employability skills.

Figure 6. Transferable Skills Developed Through Participation in Extracurricular Activities from a Graduates' Perspective (n=65).



Note. Teamwork M=3.69, Motivation, and Initiative M=3.78, Flexibility M=3.77, Time Management M=3.82, Creative Thinking M=3.85, Problem-solving M=3.88.

In the alumni's rating, a weighted average of M=3.80 indicates that ECAs participation enhances the listed transferable skills, as participants Somewhat Agree with this.

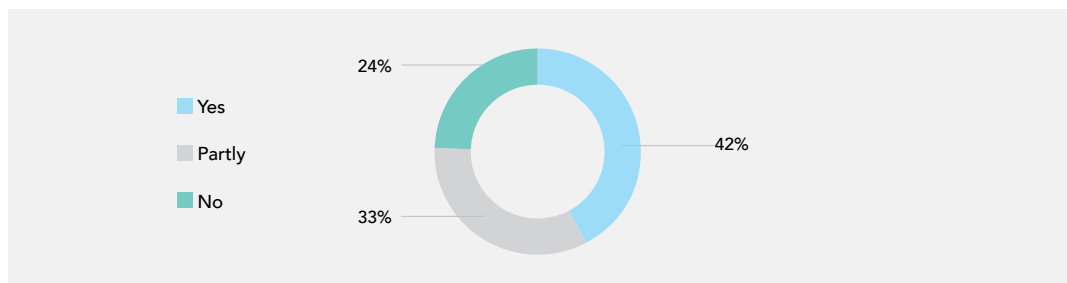
When asked participants who reported they found a job and participated in ECAs (n=57, M=2, SD=0.71) and if they believe ECAs helped them to find the job, 49% of the participants responded it Partially helped them, 26% of the participants said No it did not help them, and only 24% of graduates answered Yes.

Those participants who reported they did not participate in ECAs (n=12) named the reasons for this such as they were overwhelmed with studies/did not have time (n=5), did not know where to find the information about ECAs (n=2), already had a part-time job (n= 2) and were not aware of the ECAs benefits (n=1).

Employed graduates

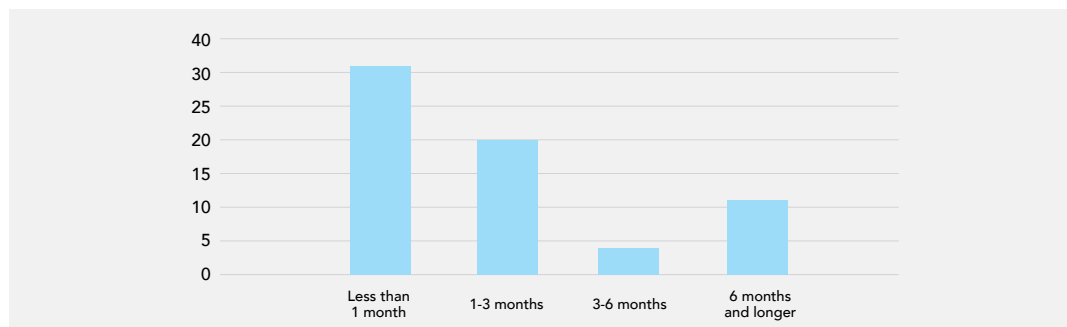
The participants who reported that they found at least one full-time job after graduation (n=66) continued to complete the following questions about their job satisfaction; if the job was related to OPAIC degree, the length of their job search before they became employed. Forty-two per cent 42% of the participants perceived their first full-time job after graduation was Related to an OPAIC degree, 33% of the participants said it was Partly Related, and 24% responded that there was No Relation (M=1.82, SD=0.80) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. How a Full-time Job After Graduation Relates to Graduates Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus degree



Moreover, most of the participants (47%) reported that it took less than one month to find their first full-time job since they graduated (M=1.92, SD=1.09) (see Figure 8). The data collected demonstrated that most of the participants (61%) were Extremely and Somewhat Satisfied with that full-time job. Whereas Extremely and Somewhat Dissatisfied with that full-time collected only 9% of the responses (M=3.61, SD=1.03).

Figure 8. The Length of the Job Search Before Finding Employment.



Participants' Profiles

There were seven participants (undergraduate and postgraduate) that took part in the interviews who represented different nationalities and OPAIC programmes (see Table 6). Only one participant reported that they did not participate in ECAs.

Table 6. Interview Participants' Profiles

PARTICIPANTS	OPAIC PROGRAMME	FOUND JOB AFTER GRADUATION	SPENT TIME TO FIND A JOB AFTER GRADUATION	ECAS PARTICIPATION	ECAS HELPED DO FIND A JOB
Graduate 1	Graduate Diploma in Sales and Marketing	yes	1-3 months	Student Ambassador Program, recruitment events, employability workshops, Internship.	yes
Graduate 2	Post Graduate Diploma in Applied Management	yes	1 month	Did not participate in any.	no
Graduate 3	Master of Applied Management	yes	less than 1 month	Employability workshops, recruitment events, information interviews, volunteering for the Chinese community, Marketing Associations networking events; professional meetups.	partly
Graduate 4	Graduate Diploma in Sales and Marketing	yes	Less than 1 month	Student Ambassador Program, volunteering, member of Community Patrol NZ, recruitment event, internship.	partly
Graduate 5	Graduate Diploma in Hotel Management	yes	1-3 months	Internship, religious communities, part-time jobs.	yes
Graduate 6	Graduate Diploma in Sales and Marketing	yes	less than 1 month	Student Ambassador Program, employability workshops, part-time job, professional conferences, internship, professional training, skill development program, focus groups, volunteering charity for Paralympics.	partly

PARTICIPANTS	OPAIC PROGRAMME	FOUND JOB AFTER GRADUATION	SPENT TIME TO FIND A JOB AFTER GRADUATION	ECAS PARTICIPATION	ECAS HELPED DO FIND A JOB
Graduate 7	Graduate Diploma in Applied Management	yes	Less than 1 month	Student Ambassador Programme, networking, recruitment, meetups, showcase, volunteering, internship.	partly

Interestingly, when participants were asked what they would have participated in if they could go back in time, most of them said that volunteering was something they would spend more time on.

“If I get a chance to do it again, I will participate more in activities doing something like charity organisations.” (Participant (P)1).

“Should better participate in internships and volunteering. As a volunteer, you can cultivate both self-value and social value.” (P5).

“I missed a lot of volunteering where you guys went to plant trees, and I felt really bad about that. I really, really wanna do something useful for the Society.” (P6).

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Challenges

Participants reported the challenges they faced when they moved to NZ. Some of them experienced loneliness because they did not know anyone and moved by themselves. All participants said they shared the challenge of adapting to a new country, environment, rules, behaviour, and kiwi culture. Those participants with previous work experience back home reported that the most challenging part was to adapt to the new work culture because of the previous work experience back home that created some behaviour patterns. There were other difficulties except finding a job, they had to learn how to stay positive through ECAs (resilience). Two graduates shared that they had shy personalities, and this meant they had to learn from the beginning how to socialise, and they pushed themselves out of their comfort zone to meet people.

“I had difficulties talking to people, socialise. It is not that I am a snob, I’m just really shy. So, I pushed myself towards meetings or wherever I can see (meet) a lot of people. So, I would get this into stress situation and overcome this fear”. (P6)

The participants faced the factor of a language barrier and difficulty understanding many accents, including the kiwi accent. Some participants changed their professional profile, which means they had to learn how to do a smooth transition to a new profession or industry in NZ, and ECAs helped them to progress.

Participants from different cultures acknowledged that the kiwi culture was very new and different from their own. For example, the Russian culture is very direct; Chinese culture - hard-working, working overtime is normal. However, it does not match the NZ culture - it was an obstacle to getting along with local people. Participants had to learn small talk, ways to communicate with lecturers and colleagues (part-time job), adapting to work in a multicultural environment and balancing personal and work life.

Barriers to participation

Participant 2, who did not participate in ECAs at all and the others who said they would like to participate more than they did, named some of the reasons why they could not do it:

- Did not know about many of the ECAs
- Did not know that it was important to participate
- Busy with studies and applying for jobs
- ECAs time clashes with classes.

REASONS AND MOTIVATIONS

The participants reported reasons that motivated them to participate in ECAs, and the researchers grouped them into four: ECAs-oriented, People-oriented, Job-oriented, Personal (see Table 7).

Table 7. Reasons and Motivation Factors to Participate in Extracurricular Activities.

ECAS-ORIENTED	PEOPLE-ORIENTED	JOB-ORIENTED	PERSONAL
To volunteer with OPAIC first because it's easier than by yourself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To find friends. - To avoid loneliness. - To connect with classmates and OPAIC staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To improve knowledge about the culture at the workplace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To practice English. - To get close to the country. - To improve communications.
To be part of the Student Ambassador program to get inside information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To make people aware of you. - To network for business and personal purposes. - To socialise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To practice presentation skills. - To learn about the industry; - To find a job. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To become an excellent person - To develop soft skills. - To push myself out of my comfort zone.
Volunteering - cultivate self-value and social value.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To meet people who can introduce you to their colleagues (networking). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internship to get work experience (test knowledge on practice and improve. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To get used to NZ accent.
To volunteer to make an impact and leave something.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To create a circle from different nationalities. - To understand new society. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To learn the expectations from industry, employer, Human Resources. - To learn the professional lingo. - To become aware of the reality of the job market; 	

THE IMPACT OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES PARTICIPATION

Benefits

All participants, including the one that did not participate in ECAs, agreed that participation in different ECAs is very beneficial in many ways. The most popular benefit cited by participants was networking with potential employers, recruiters, and industry professionals to get industry insights, understand the expectations, and a chance to find a job. Secondly, they reported that socialising, communication, English,

and other transferable skills were developing through participation in ECAs. There were more benefits that participants named, which are represented in Table 8.

“Attending those activities can make someone feel you are... getting...close to this country.” (P4)

“In my personal opinion I have gained a lot of benefits when I joined ECA activities. I ... met my peers and I was happy during my part-time job.” (P5)

“And establishing a network is very vital for your development or career to start in NZ. Secondly, of course, you learn English and if you are attending professional meetings, professional conferences, you also learn your industry lingo (terminology), which is also very important for your career development.” (P6)

Table 8. Benefits From Extracurricular Activities Participation

- The creation of new networks with peers and professionals (networking).
- The opportunity to stand out and let people know about you, your achievements, hobbies (personal branding) can lead to a suitable job.
- The improvement of communication, socialising, people skills, English language, and other transferrable soft skills.
- The feeling of connection and belonging to a country/company/group, keeping the inner balance and well-being.
- The opportunity to tap into the hidden job market.
- The ability to get industry insights, to accept the industry knowledge that people share with you.
- The chance to broaden your vocabulary and express your thoughts clear more clearly.
- ECAs can teach you to change behaviour patterns, habits from previous experience, to become flexible and adaptable to the new workplace culture. ECAs were opportunities to practise presentation skills, improve personality, learn a positive attitude to be more social. Your body language can develop, and this way, you can become more likeable.

Soft skills

OPAIC participants reported that many soft skills had been developed or improved through participation in ECAs, mainly communication skills, teamwork, and self-confidence. Some participants also said that they noticed time-management and personality improvement (more proactive and motivated). However, one graduate was sceptical about the motivation improvement through participation in ECAs.

Outcomes

The participants reflected on the outcomes and achievements that they believed were connected to their ECAs participation (see Table 9).

Table 9. Outcomes and Achievements Connected to Extracurricular Activities Participation.

Participant 1	<p>Negative: Did not learn much new from Employability workshops, but it was a good summary and reminder to push ourselves forward.</p> <p>Positive: I got a job after the internship. I partly improved my employability skills. I received encouragement from the Employability team to do stuff, felt empowered after attending workshops.</p>
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Participant 3	Positive: I placed myself in the industry, gained self-confidence, got knowledge of the environment and industry. I found a job through the network within two months while I was a student. I am 100% sure that I enhanced my employability because I went on professional meetups and met people from the industry. I impressed the guy who hired me because I had industry understanding/insights, and I was well-prepared for this job. People were keen to meet me because of my “brave” personality because I approached them on LinkedIn. We became friends.
Participant 4	Negative: I do not think that I got a job because of volunteering – no connection. My employability was mostly improved by my previous experience. Positive: The internship helped me to get my first job. Most important, I improved my English speaking, writing, and listening skills. I found a friend from volunteering.
Participant 5	Positive: I got mentorship from my employer (managerial skills, start-up business knowledge). While I had a part-time job, I improved my communication skills, shared ideas with the team, felt happy, met friends, improved my chances to become employable. I learned time management - faster adapted to the work environment and managed to do work better.
Participant 6	Positive: I certainly believe I enhanced my employability. I communicate better in English, I learned how to express my thoughts clearly, and improved my vocabulary. I developed time management through Student Ambassadors meetings and volunteering.
Participant 7	Positive: I believe I became more employable. I learned platform skills and communication skills for my future career. I practised how to be proactive. I learned how to be aware of soft skills and knew how to self-reflect. In the beginning, I was nervous during the interview, but transferrable soft skills helped me at work. I learned about the kiwi work environment and developed time management. It helped me to feel more secure when I got my first job in my industry. I became more confident and knowledgeable if I compare the first week and last week at OPAIC.

DISCUSSION

Several factors should be considered in this section while discussing the findings. Firstly, the target population for the study was alumni who graduated from OPAIC in 2019. However, participants could graduate at any time during 2019. Hence, when the data was collected in 2020, it was more than one year since some of the participants graduated. During the data analysis, it was found that participants provided contradictory information where they answered that they participated in different types of activities and ticked those. The same participants answered Zero times participation in all the listed activities, including those they first reported engaged in.

Moreover, during the interviews, some participants realised they provided inaccurate information about the ECAs because they forgot about some of the ECAs they participated in. Therefore, it means that it was challenging for some participants to recollect the events. For future research, the recommendation would be to look at a group of graduates who completed courses no longer than six months prior.

Secondly, data about the ECAs participation was not collected for 31 alumni due to identified exclusion criteria. However, for future research, it would be interesting to observe the proactiveness of all students in general to understand the preferences and impact of particular ECAs.

This study aimed to determine if there was a correlation between the employment status of graduates and

their engagement in ECAs. It was not proved statistically through correlation and regression data analysis that employment status was connected to the higher number of ECA participants participated in. However, it was evident that employed participants had more engagement in ECAs than the unemployed. Therefore, it might be the case that the correlation did not appear due to the lack of variable change. Nevertheless, no mathematical correlation does not mean there is no causation (Penn, 2018). Employment outcomes for alumni 2019 could be caused by several factors, like previous work experience and participation in ECAs, including active engagement. Further research is needed to investigate these.

Meanwhile, qualitative data from the survey and interviews helped to answer the study question on how engagement in ECAs impact OPAIC graduates' employability.

The findings showed that participants participated in different ECAs when they were students, such as internal: OPAIC Employability workshops, Student Ambassador Program, OPAIC networking events, recruitment events, face-to-face meetings with Employability team, OPAIC talks and industry guests' events, internships; and external: volunteering, meetups and professional meetings, networking events and part-time jobs. The study found that internal events were the most attended. This can be explained by the convenience and accessibility factor (Dragin-Jensen et al., 2018). Amongst the least attended external events was volunteering. However, during the interviews, participants (undergraduate) talked about the importance of volunteering and reported that they did not participate but regretted it and realised that they wanted to do more. This aligns with the literature that students might perceive volunteering as low value because there is no direct connection to get the job from this activity (Tymon, 2013). Nevertheless, OPAIC participants perceived as high value the development of transferable soft skills and learning something new from ECAs participation. This aligns with several researchers findings where learning and developing were among the top motivation factors for involvement in ECAs (Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017; Arcodia et al., 2014). The literature findings reported that postgraduate students were more proactive and focused on career-related activities (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). However, this study shows that both undergraduate and postgraduate students demonstrated participation but in different ECAs. Undergraduate students were more interested in meetups and professional meetings, OPAIC networking events, the Student Ambassador program, meeting with the Employability team, and internships. Postgraduate students were more interested in volunteering, OPAIC employability workshops, meeting with industry guests, and recruitment events.

A smaller group of employed participants reported that they perceived ECAs participation helped them to find a job. The findings from the interviews showed that it was not evident from participants when they were students that there was a direct connection between participation in ECAs and finding a job. This finding supports the findings of Tymon (2013) that a smaller group of students recognise the value of participation for employability development. However, four of the seven interviewed participants reported that their internships and part-time jobs continued as full-time employment as soon as they graduated.

Most of the participants (75%) who found at least one full-time job after graduation from OPAIC reported that this job was related or partly related to their OPAIC degree. Therefore, this does not align with Pais (2012) finding that graduates usually accept any first job to pay the bills and study loans. The findings of this study demonstrate positive outcomes, and according to the "magic bullet" model, OPAIC provided the opportunities to gain academic knowledge and develop employability skills for international alumni in 2019.

In line with the literature, participants reported challenges being new to the country, with lack of knowledge about local culture, industry insights, workplace environment, no professional and personal connections, poor or average English skills, and being shy personality (Clark et al., 2015; Nguyen & Hartz, 2020). The NZ accent was one of the challenges not identified in the literature for international students but was mentioned by all interview participants. All participants are not aware of the NZ accent prior to their arrival to the country. However, from the study by Gordon (2009), it was evident that people around the world have

trouble understanding New Zealanders. Those factors usually lead to the difficulty of the transition to the local job market (Berquist et al., 2019; Jackson, 2017).

Moreover, the data generated for reasons for low engagement collected from surveys and interviews support findings (Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017; Gribble, 2015; Tran, 2017) that participants either did not believe in the importance of employability skills development and participation in ECAs; or they were busy with studies and did not have time to participate or to search for ECAs info.

Although participants experienced challenges and had barriers to participation, they expressed a positive perception of the ECAs participation and reported that they believe engagement enhances their employability.

Participants said they believe engagement in ECAs develops transferrable soft skills, and the majority reported they improved communication skills, teamwork, and self-confidence. Moreover, findings show that participants recognised many benefits from participation in networking and industry events, volunteering, internships, part-time job, student communities (Student Ambassador program), employability workshops, and career guidance services. These findings support many previous similar studies (Akinrinmade & Ayeni, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Education New Zealand, 2021; Fu, 2021; Kamerade & Paine, 2014; Lau et al., 2014; Lundberg et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2016; Nilsson, 2019; O'Connor & Bodicoat, 2017; Stam, 2010; Van Hoya et al., 2013; Ylonen, 2012). Interestingly, one participant reported that she was encouraged and empowered after attending the OPAIC employability workshops. This aligns with Robertson (2013), who found the same benefit from the engagement with career services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides recommendations based on the primary and secondary data collected from the semi-structured interviews and literature review. Initially, recommendations were made by participants and researchers to OPAIC as a tertiary education provider. However, these recommendations are applicable to any other HE provider interested in improving students' employability and raising the level of engagement in ECAs.

Recommendations to Students from Alumni

The participants shared their observations and made several recommendations for current and future international students. Some participants recommended not to leave the job search and document preparation to the last moment and use assistance from OPAIC professional staff while studying. One of the observations by participant 4 was that the interns from OPAIC at her current workplace do not treat an internship as a chance to get a job, they see it only as a credit for programme completion and complete it as soon as possible. Participant 4 recommended attention not to be paid to the company's industry for an internship but to treat it as the chance to demonstrate their advantages, establish a good network and learn as much as possible. Participant 3 recommended not to ask for a job directly at the networking events as it puts pressure on others and makes the conversations uncomfortable.

"It's really important not only come to this hard skills development but also (attend) just general meetups with anybody who has been in this environment for some time because they really can share some valuable knowledge." (P6)

Recommendations to OPAIC from Alumni

Data collected during the interviews showed that there were complaints from several participants, i.e., they did not have two or more internship options.

"The placement team they sent your CV to different companies and then they pick you right...I was given only one option. And I would like to have more." (P6)

There was a lack of industry guests during studies connected to the digital marketing industry. Some participants experienced a lack of information about the ECAs on campus, did not receive any emails about the events/activities. One participant observed that some of their classmates were not aware of employment's legal side, so they went through challenging moments with their workplaces, and it was scary.

However, there were also words of appreciation from participants who acknowledged that OPAIC provided a lot of services and were happy about it.

Based on the participants' experience, the following recommendations were provided to OPAIC:

1. Invite more guest speakers from different industries.
2. Go to classes and send emails to promote ECAs.
3. Make sure the timetable does not clash with employability events on campus.
4. Push students to engage with industry representatives to make them learn how to ask questions and express themselves.
5. Make sure to raise awareness of the benefits of ECAs participation and how it relates to employability.
6. Invite more alumni to share success stories or to be mentors.
7. Provide more than one option to choose from for an internship.
8. Be transparent about the reality of the job market in NZ to avoid high expectations.

Recommendations to OPAIC from the Researchers

This study demonstrated that it is essential to make international students aware of the transferrable soft skills and help them to reflect on their capabilities gained through classes and ECAs engagement. Moreover, it would appear important to provide evidence and endorse those capabilities to encourage them to be proactive (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). The Learner Capability Framework has been implemented at Otago Polytechnic (Dunedin) and applied through the process of mapping capabilities to students' courses via the "I Am Capable" online tool (Otago Polytechnic, 2019). However, the recommendation for OPAIC is to map the capabilities with ECAs outcomes and highlight the importance of the development of these. If the process of gaining capabilities was transparent, engaging lecturers, students, the Employability team, and employers, the value of getting those capabilities would be evident to students.

The endorsed capabilities portfolio is getting popular nowadays as it contains self-reflection and understanding of how far students have progressed (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018; Pool & Sewell, 2007).

However, OPAIC has to promote proactive participation first to get the students to take more responsibility to engage and invest in the capabilities development and endorsement (Tymon, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to investigate the impact of international students' participation in ECAs on their employability. Nowadays, the employability of international graduates is one of the main challenges for HE providers, employers, and students themselves.

HE providers cannot guarantee that students will get a job in a particular industry. However, it is possible to create a strategic plan for coordination, monitoring, and facilitation of employability skills development through ECAs, and adding to an academic degree.

As the study has demonstrated, most of the OPAIC participants acknowledged the helpful OPAIC services, the benefits from engagement in different ECAs, the development of transferrable soft skills that employers want to see in the graduates, and the enhancement of employability. However, international students struggled to find time to participate in some of the ECAs, and it created low engagement.

Therefore, OPAIC must continue promoting and raising awareness about the positive impact of ECAs participation and monitor the outcomes.

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