



Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective

Journal:	<i>Human Resource Management Journal</i>
Manuscript ID	19-HRMJ-05069.R4
Wiley - Manuscript type:	Original Article
Journal Keywords:	Employability, Careers, Diversity, Talent management
Keywords - Methodological:	Thematic Analysis, Qualitative research methods
Other Keywords:	dramaturgy, work experience
Abstract:	<p>This paper examines employers' graduate employability expectations. In an overcrowded graduate labour market, employers must distinguish between equally qualified graduates to determine 'standout employability'. Grounded in a dramaturgical perspective we integrate concepts of skilful social action with signaling theory to extend the processual conceptualization of graduate employability. We report a qualitative abductive analysis of employers' expectations of graduates' employability performances. We theorize that employers frame and decode signals of standout employability from graduates' narrations of experientially referenced skilful social action. These form the dramaturgical backdrop from which employers infer unique personal brand assets and qualities they associate with standout employability. Our analysis has important implications for Higher Education, HRM and career counselling practitioners. It indicates that the employability value of non-HE experience is as a backdrop for the dramaturgical performance of graduate employability rather than for the acquisition of work-related skills or the enablement of work ready behaviours.</p>

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Abstract

This paper examines employers' graduate employability expectations. In an overcrowded graduate labour market, employers must distinguish between equally qualified graduates to determine 'standout employability'. Grounded in a dramaturgical perspective we integrate concepts of skilful social action with signaling theory to extend the processual conceptualization of graduate employability. We report a qualitative abductive analysis of employers' expectations of graduates' employability performances. We theorize that employers frame and decode signals of standout employability from graduates' narrations of experientially referenced skilful social action. These form the dramaturgical backdrop from which employers infer unique personal brand assets and qualities they associate with standout employability. Our analysis has important implications for Higher Education, HRM and career counselling practitioners. It indicates that the employability value of non-HE experience is as a backdrop for the dramaturgical performance of graduate employability rather than for the acquisition of work-related skills or the enablement of work ready behaviours.

Keywords: graduate employability; dramaturgy, work experience, signaling theory

Practitioner Notes

What is currently known.

- The 'employer voice' is central in understanding graduate employability
- In an overcrowded graduate labour market where supply of graduates exceeds organizational demand for graduate level recruits, employers must distinguish between graduates with similar skills, qualifications and accomplishments.
- Work and other forms of experience are assumed to enhance employability but their relationship to employability outcomes is not clear.

What this paper adds

- Empirical description of the dimensions of employer's graduate employability expectations
- Identification of the signals employers utilise to determine qualities of standout employability.
- Explanation of the role of skilled social action grounded in work and other experience for employers' framing of signals of standout employability.

The implications for practitioners

- For HE and career counselling practitioners - graduates' standout employability performances must be grounded in narratives of experience that signal a shared social context from which employers can infer organizational belonging and fit.
- For graduate recruiters – reliance on signals from which idealized personal, social and cultural qualities are inferred may limit the effectiveness of organizations' diversity and inclusion policies and systems
- For career development and HRD practitioners – further development of graduate recruits' skilful social action capabilities may be important to ensure their ongoing internal employability development beyond the point of their transition into the organization.

Signaling standout graduate employability: The employer perspective

The [employment readiness](#) of the next generation of graduate workers is a central concern for HRM (Costea, Amiridis, & Crump, 2012) and employability is an important concept within managerial and HRM toolkits (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017). Graduate employability also dominates the agenda of [graduates](#), employers, policy makers, practitioners and scholars (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011; Handley, 2018). [Much of the HRM literature assumes that individuals need to take proactive ownership over their own employability \(Forrier, de Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018\). However, in a graduate labour market context where the supply of qualified and skilled graduates exceeds demand by employing organizations, employers must distinguish between graduates with similar skills and qualifications to make judgements about which graduates will make](#)

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3 the transition from higher education into employment (McCracken, Currie, & Harrison, 2016;
4 Nilsson & Ellstrom, 2012). Studies show that employers associate personal and intangible
5 qualities such as ‘talent’, ‘creativity’, ‘dynamism’, and ‘potential’ with exceptional
6 employability but little is known about how they recognise and respond to the qualities of
7 what we refer to here as standout graduate employability. Our paper contributes to this gap in
8 knowledge. Our approach is grounded in a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective (1959,
9 1974). Employers constitute the principal audience for graduates’ employability
10 ‘performance’ and, using the analogy of employers as ‘talent spotters’, our article extends the
11 processual view of employability as conceptualized by Holmes (2013). It does this by
12 examining employers’ expectations of graduates’ performance of standout employability and
13 the processes through which they recognise and respond to employability performances.

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Theoretically, we integrate concepts of skilful social action (Fligstein, 2001) with signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to explain how employers frame and decode signals of what Goffman refers to as idealized (desired) attributes. We apply this in relation to graduates’ employability performance beyond visible, explicit and literal criteria such as qualifications and credentials. The conceptual framing that we develop integrates three important features of employers’ constructions of standout employability (see Figure 1). This overcomes the limitations of what Holmes (2013) categorises as possessional and positional explanations of employability that focus either on graduates’ possession of technical and non-technical skills acquired during Higher Education, or on their personal, psychological, cultural and social capital resources acquired as a result of social position within the socio-economic hierarchy.

In extending the processual approach to employability, this article makes three important contributions to the HRM literature on graduate employability. First, it contributes important new knowledge about the subjective and informational processes from which employers identify personal and intangible qualities that they associate with standout

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3 employability. Second, it contributes important understanding of the role of skilled social
4 action as a basis from which employers infer and respond to signals of subjective qualities
5 that they interpret as indicators of standout employability. Third, it offers a timely
6 explanation of the value of non-HE experience by theorizing its role as the basis for
7 narratives of skilled social action from which employers interpret signals and construct
8 standout employability.
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18 *Insert Figure 1 about here*

21 **The construction of standout employability**

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23 The concept of employability is multifaceted and problematic (Suleman, 2018;
24 Williams, Dodd, Steel, & Randall, 2016). The word itself conflates the ‘ability’ of individuals
25 with ‘fitness for work’ or ‘work-readiness’ (Cremin, 2010; Vanhercke, De Cuyper, & Peeters,
26 2014; Williams, et al., 2016). Within EU policy, employability is one of the four ‘pillars’ of
27 the European Employment Strategy, and graduate employability is high on the agenda of
28 many governments, with expectations that HE should contribute to national economic growth
29 (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006) and prepare graduates for a successful transition into
30 employment.
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42 **Dimensions of employability**

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44 Policy narratives of graduate employability are grounded in perceptions of a global
45 and widespread graduate skills gap (Institute of Student Employers [ISE], 2018) and
46 numerous studies have attempted to identify and classify employers’ requirements of
47 graduates (cf. Archer & Davison, 2008; Institute of Student Employers [ISE], 2018; UK
48 Commission for Employment and Skills, 2015). These studies, representing what Holmes
49 (2013) describes as the possessional approach to employability, have identified a range of
50 existing and potential cognitive and non-cognitive skills, knowledge and attributes that
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3 employers indicate to be important at the point of transition from university to employment.
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5 These collectively represent generic business relevant knowledge and skills, interpersonal
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7 competencies, and personal qualities (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Gault, Leach, & Duey,
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9 2010; ISE, 2018; Van Dam, 2004).
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13 However, an exclusive focus on the skill and competency of individual entrants to the
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15 graduate labour market fails to take account of contextual demand and supply-side issues.
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17 Globally, the proportion of young people entering HE continues to increase (Organization for
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19 Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013) and graduate level occupations
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21 have not expanded at the same rate (Handel, 2012) and may have ‘stalled’ in developed
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23 economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Beaudry, Green & Sand,
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25 2014, 2016). In addition, labour markets increasingly feature flexible, non-standard and
26
27 arguably ‘precarious’ employment patterns (Lowden, et al., 2011; McQuaid & Lindsay,
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29 2005; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007). The global imbalance between graduate labour supply and
30
31 demand, means that the possession of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, knowledge,
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33 attributes and qualifications is not sufficient as a basis from which employers can determine
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35 graduate employability (cf. Costea, Amiridis, & Crump, 2012; Kee-Cheok Cheong et al.,
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37 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Silva et al., 2016). Suleman’s (2018) review of
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39 the employability literature concludes that studies provide no basis for consensus about the
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41 most important employability skills; indeed uncertainty has increased rather than decreased.
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48 In this context, checklists of cognitive, non-cognitive and technical skills, behaviours
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50 and credentials offer a limited basis from which employers can differentiate between equally
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52 skilled and qualified graduates. Further studies have highlighted employers’ concerns about
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54 organizational job-fit or person-fit and have identified the importance of employers’
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56 assumptions about the value of human, social, cultural and psychological capital resources for
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58 employability (Clarke, 2018; Tomlinson, 2012; Tomlinson, 2017; Williams, et al., 2016).
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3 These studies align with the seminal research of Brown and Hesketh (2004) and with what
4
5 Holmes (2013) describes as the positional approach to employability. They identify that
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7 wider social and economic inequalities may lead to differential opportunities for graduates to
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9 acquire such resources.
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13 Further studies into employer expectations of employability have examined
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15 organizationally constructed graduate careers websites and graduate job advertisements.
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17 These studies suggest that a range of personal and intangible dimensions such as ‘talent’;
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19 ‘creativity’; ‘dynamism’; and ‘potential’ are important features of employers conceptions of
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21 employability (Costea, Amiridis, & Crump, 2012; Handley, 2018). They conclude that
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23 employers’ expectations of employability extend beyond cognitive and non-cognitive skills,
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25 knowledge and attributes (Branine, 2008; Collet, Hine, and du Plessis, 2014; Hora, 2019;
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27 Ingram & Allen, 2018; Lepistö & Ihtola, 2018). However, the means by which employers’
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29 identify and evaluate such personal and intangible qualities in their conception of
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31 employability is not clear. Therefore, our first research question, which addresses this gap in
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33 the current literature, is: what are the dimensions of graduate employability from the
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35 employers’ perspective?
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40 41 **Signals of standout employability** 42

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44 Studies that examine graduate recruitment and selection practices of large private and
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46 public sector organizations indicate the challenges employers face in differentiating between
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48 graduates at the point at which they transition from HE to employment (McCracken et al,
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50 2016; Ashley, 2016). The perspective of students about to transition to employment has been
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52 well researched (c.f. Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017;
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54 Wilton, 2012). However, employers constitute the principal evaluators of graduate
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56 employability at the point of transition from university to employment and little is known
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3 about the informational signals they use to identify exceptional or what we refer to here as
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about the informational signals they use to identify exceptional or what we refer to here as
standout graduate employability.

Drawing on Goffman's (1974) dramaturgical approach our second research question
addresses the challenges that employers face in differentiating between graduates'
employability 'performance' to identify qualities of standout employability. Goffman's
approach suggests that employers' expectations of the performance of standout employability
may comprise three features. First, dramaturgical circumspection, where employers expect a
performance that communicates foresight and preparation for the labour market. *Second,*
dramaturgical loyalty where graduates' performance suggests a congruence between their
personal norms and values and those of their employer 'audience'. Third, dramaturgical
discipline will enable employers, in the context of the performance of standout employability,
to be able to infer and empathise with features of the graduate's life experience beyond the
limitations of 'the script' concerned with employment and work-related skills and abilities.

Our second research question considers the signals that employers expect from
graduates' employability performances that they associate with standout employability. In
our focus on employers' expectations, our intention is not to conduct a dramaturgical analysis
per se and the focus is not on graduates' resources at hand. Rather, in formulating our second
research question, we seek to give voice to employers' signaling expectations in relation to
standout employability performances by drawing on signaling theory (Connelly et al, 2011;
Spence, 1973). This is appropriate to our analysis as it recognises the imperfect information
that employers have to work from in making appraisals of graduates' employability
performances at the point of transition into employment. We seek to examine employers'
descriptions of the signals that go beyond immediate visible, explicit and literal employability
components such as qualifications and credentials. Our second research question is: what are
compelling signals of standout employability from the employers' perspective?

Socially skilled performance

In conceptualizing employability as an emergent outcome of situated social processes, the processual approach (Holmes, 2013) draws attention to important interactive processes through which employers respond to graduates' signaling of workplace related skills or qualities. Studies suggest that signals that resonate with employers' assumed or remembered pasts, predicted or projected futures, or with other connected settings, will trigger a favourable response by employers (Lorino, Mourey, Schmidt, 2017; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Observations of social skills deployed in organizational settings to evoke empathic relationships, for example, through membership of a work-team, are a useful basis from which employers can frame and interpret favourable signals with existing members of their organization. However, the point of graduates' transition from HE to employment rarely provides such opportunities. Studies indicate that experience gained outside HE provides an opportunity from which graduates can generate employability qualities (cf. Archer & Davison, 2008; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Silva, et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2017). However, the relationship between non-HE related experience, skill development and graduate labour market outcomes is undertheorized (Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Wilton, 2012).

To extend the processual approach to employability, we draw on Fligstein's (2001) conceptualization of socially skilled performance. Fligstein proposed this concept as a means to make sense of the ways through which actors in interpersonal interactions induce cooperation and favourable responses from others in specific contextual situations. Fligstein defines social skill as the ability to evoke empathic relationships with others. Socially skilled action is framed in organizational and cultural contexts. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1957, 1974), Fligstein explains differential success in interactive outcomes as, in part at least, as a consequence the narration of 'stories' as frames from which positive affective responses by actors can be achieved in specific contextual situations. Fligstein suggests that,

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3 through narration processes, skilled social actors are able to produce meaning for others and
4 produce meaning for themselves at the same time. This occurs through their communication
5 of an understanding of the ambiguities and certainties of the contextual 'field of action' and
6 the framing of their actions in accordance with that context and their place within it. They are
7 adept at convincing others that their interests and broader frames are aligned in some way.
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15 Fligstein's conceptualization is appropriate for our analysis as a means to understand
16 and interrogate employers' interpretive and framing processes, which Goffman's (1974)
17 typology refers to dramaturgical discipline. It suggests that employers make judgements
18 about graduates' employability through a process of inference and empathy with graduates'
19 experiential narratives of skilful social action. The processual approach to employability
20 (Holmes, 2013) recognises the importance of 'meaning making bundles of relationships and
21 event clusters' (Maclean et al., 2011: 20). Therefore, narratives grounded in socially skilled
22 action constitute a significant signaling frame that employers may use to decode individuals'
23 potential value to their organization (Silzer & Church, 2009; Meyers, 2020).
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37 We draw on Fligstein's conceptualization to extend the processual approach to
38 graduate employability. We propose that narratives of skilful social action grounded in work
39 or non-work related contexts outside of HE constitute a compelling signaling frame through
40 which employers can infer and respond to qualities that they construct as standout
41 employability. This question focuses on employers' interpretive and framing processes of
42 narrations of socially skilled action as a feature of their signaling expectations associated with
43 standout employability. Our third research question is, what role does skilful social action
44 play in employers' framing of standout employability?
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55 Methodology

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3 As indicated earlier in this article, our paper is grounded in a processual view of
4 graduates' university-to-employment transition (Holmes, 2013) and our focus is on the
5 expectations of employers as key agents in the university-to-employment transition process
6 (Cai, 2013; Silva et al., 2016). An abductive approach to qualitative inquiry, informed the
7 interpretive theorization processes (Rinehart, 2020) on which this article is based.
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15 Semi-structured interview data, comprised the data set for our analysis. These
16 interviews comprised part of a larger study into graduate employability and 'HE learning
17 gain' involving four UK Universities (one elite university [a member of the UK 'Russell
18 Group'], one research intensive University not included in the Russell Group listing; one
19 applied / vocational university [known in the UK as a 'Post-1992' university] and one
20 specialist Arts University).
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30 Following initial questions relating to the interviewee's organizational context the
31 interview structure focused on encouraging participants to describe 'a top graduate' and to
32 discuss what employers look for when they employ a graduate. The use of probing questions
33 during the interviews provided participants with flexibility to expand on their expectations
34 and specifically to reflect on their expectations of 'skills, competencies and personal
35 qualities' and the value of degree-related knowledge and qualifications. In addition,
36 employers were asked what they considered to be 'the most important thing' and the areas of
37 greatest challenge for graduates in the university-to-employment transition.
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49 To access employers with familiarity with graduate employability issues, named
50 contacts in organizations, with whom each of the participating Universities' careers
51 departments had a connection, were contacted. Where the organization responded positively,
52 the research team made further contact and took forward informed consent and other ethical
53 protocols. Research team members carried out the interviews which took place either face-to-
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3 face or by telephone. On most occasions, the person who had been the initial contact was also
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5 the interviewee, but on other occasions, the interviewee was a different person from the
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7 organization. Although there was a connection between employing organizations and the HE
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9 institutions, researchers who carried out the interviews were not engaged in other forms of
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11 communication with the interviewees. Although our approach to interviewee recruitment was
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13 opportunistic, with careers and employability departments acting as gatekeepers, the resulting
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15 sample comprised a mix of employer participants, some with specialist HR experience and
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17 some with operational management responsibilities.
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23 A pilot interview was conducted with the Head of an employer-led association that
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25 focuses on promoting good practice in graduate recruitment. No changes were made to the
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27 interview schedule following this pilot and the results are included in the study findings. A
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29 team of researchers undertook the research interviews, which were audio recorded for
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31 subsequent transcription verbatim, and were between 40 and 75 minutes in length. To ensure
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33 consistency of approach the interviewers used an interview protocol maintained on a central
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35 repository. They communicated regularly to discuss emerging issues and to resolve any
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37 questions about the protocol.
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42 Once twelve interviews were completed, the research team reviewed the extent to
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44 which the sample achieved variation across organizational size and sector as we were
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46 committed to a sample enabling consideration of homogeneity and heterogeneity. We were
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48 curious as to whether characteristics such as organizational size or type, or interviewee
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50 context, might affect an employer's expectations of learning gain through HE. At this review
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52 point, we decided to recruit more participant organizations. A further seven organizations
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54 were purposively included in the sample to reflect the context of smaller, entrepreneurial
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56 companies, particularly in the creative design and technology fields as smaller employers
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58 represent a high proportion of businesses and employment opportunities in most economies
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3 (Short & Gray, 2018) but are under-researched in relation to the transition from HE to
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5 employment. The resulting sample (Table 1) included nineteen organizations: nine small,
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7 three medium-sized and seven large companies from public, private and not-for-profit sectors
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9 operating in a range of sectors such as sales; recruitment; logistics; engineering and
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11 construction; creative industries and services.
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15 *Table 1 positioned around here*
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19 The abductive analysis processes we enacted involved us in immersion in the
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21 interview data and a purposeful process of scrutinizing the interview evidence to be open to
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23 theoretical possibilities (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). This abductive stance required us to
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25 be “open to notice, recognize and respond to prompts during the research process” (Rinehart,
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27 2020, pp.1-2). This process informed the research questions that we specifically address in
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29 this article and its conceptual basis. Our initial review of the data and sense-making processes
30
31 identified the overlapping conceptualizations of employability and HE learning gain. Initially,
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33 we drew on a dramaturgical conceptual framing (Goffman, 1974) as a basis from which to
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35 explain employers’ graduate employability expectations. Further issues of signalling and
36
37 exceptionality as important features of employers’ constructions of standout employability
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39 emerged as we moved back and forth between the interview data and the literature base
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41 (Spence, 1973). Our increasing familiarity with the interview data drew attention to the
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43 importance of experience gained outside HE in employer conceptions of standout
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45 employability. This led us to consider the concept of skilled social action (Fligstein, 2001) to
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47 explain how contextually situated stories generate favourable cognitive and affective
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49 responses by employers that they construct as signals of standout employability. To
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51 summarise, our active abductive analysis process involved a back-and-forth process between
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53 data, literature and theory, as a means to new knowledge and understanding (Reichertz,
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55 2010).
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Data Analysis

We conducted an inductive interpretive thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of NVivo 12 for the qualitative data analysis process enabled an audit trail to be maintained and facilitated team members' checking, reflection and evaluation of the research process and underpinned the active and recursive abductive process of using evidence to trace what Rinehart (2020, p.2) refers to as "logics-in-hindsight".

First, three researchers read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data set and identify potential codes. The researchers then met together to discuss the outcomes of this familiarization and coding process and agree a number of initial dimensions that describe empirical dimensions of graduate employability expectations from the employer perspective. A further stage of analysis involved identifying key themes comprising standout employability, a process that led us to identify signaling theory (Spence, 1973) as an analytical framing. Our assessment of the data also indicated the importance of experience, both 'applied experience' and 'other experience' as important features of employers' conceptions of standout employability. This led us to further interrogate the data to our identification of the concept of skilled social action as a means to understand the way employers frame experience in the conceptions of standout employability.

We held meetings with researchers engaged in other relevant studies to provide an 'outsider perspective' to comment on our recursive process of interpretation and sense-making, and to ensure debate about, and confidence in, the emerging analytical outcomes (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). The peer review process for this article further challenged us (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) to examine the extent to which the evidence aligned with our emerging theoretical and conceptual claims, to refine our analytical outcomes and to evaluate the relevance of our emerging theorization, summarized in Figure 1.

Findings: Dimensions, signals and skilled social action

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3 The imperative of standout employability is a feature of our interview data from
4 employers from all organizational sizes and sectors. One employer expressed this in the
5 following way “*they’re all roughly at the same level in terms of how they’ve performed*
6 *academically, they’ve all done equally well, but most of them are at the same level. So at that*
7 *point it’s like, “Well what is going to make them stand out really?”*” (E16). In this section, we
8 summarize the main features of the interview data. We present data relating to each of the
9 dimensions of employability shown in Figure 1 and consider signals of standout
10 employability arising from these and the way that employers frame narratives of skilful social
11 action to infer qualities of standout employability.
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26 **Qualifications and credentials**

27 A clear finding from our study is that employers regard qualifications and credentials
28 as signifiers of a baseline employability expectation. Interviewees emphasized other
29 dimensions of employability. An employer from a small organization, for example, reflecting
30 on degree level qualifications, indicated that: “*It’s a minimum baseline so equally we’re not*
31 *going to employ somebody who had, was making the right noises but didn’t have the*
32 *technical skills*” (E5). Another interviewee from a large organization (E16, quoted above),
33 explained that their organization expected “*somebody that has good academic credentials,*
34 *maybe they’ve got a 2:1 or a first class honours, but also has done a lot of maybe*
35 *extracurricular stuff that can show they can demonstrate that they’re not just tied to their*
36 *academic career, but they have a personality*”.
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51 Our interview schedule included questions about the importance of university status
52 on expectations of graduate employability. Perhaps because interviewees were conscious that
53 members of the research team might disapprove were they to indicate a status hierarchy in
54 their responses, none of them suggested that university status featured in their expectations, if
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3 other dimensions were evident. However, almost half of the interviewees indicated that they
4 fostered relationships with specific universities where they believed there were university –
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7 organizational synergies. One smaller employer described their position in this way: “*Well,*
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10 *yeah there is a reputational thing. So for example when I’m looking at graduates I do think of*
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12 *there’s a great set of degrees, and I’ve employed a number of young graduates from ...*
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14 *University, and not because I was looking for ... but because ... seems to produce the kinds of*
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16 *young people who were switched onto some of the concerns that were alive in our*
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18 *department”* (E19).

21 22 **Personal and psychological qualities**

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25 Whilst the data set indicate that qualifications represent little more than a baseline
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27 threshold for employability, more than two-thirds of the interviewees indicated the
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29 importance of personal and psychological qualities. For example, “*Just because somebody*
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31 *comes from a very good university it doesn’t mean that we’re going to want them on board*
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33 *because they might not have the right personal attributes”* (E18). Qualities such as resilience
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35 were especially prevalent in the expectations of interviewees from smaller organizations, for
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37 example: “*...about resilience - how positive are you? How desperately do you want things?*
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39 *How competitive are you? How much does it hurt when you don’t get what you want? How*
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41 *do you keep going anyway?”* (E10). An interviewee from a large organization expressed it
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43 like this: “*So as we’re growing and we’re opening new parts of the business ... different*
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45 *ways of doing things within our process...so adaptability and definitely flexibility ... to add*
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47 *value in different ways is key”* (E11).

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53 Expectations of resilience were often connected with qualities of adaptability in the
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55 interview data. For example, “*So being able to adapt, be resilient, to come in thinking you’re*
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57 *going to do one thing but be prepared to be moved over and do something else is very*
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3 *important*” (E8) and *“I think resilience is about adaptability and flexibility because only a*
4 *resilient person survives when they can really change readily. So I think that’s quite*
5 *important, and particularly in an organisation like us at the moment resilience is a very*
6 *important quality”* (E19). This emphasis on expectations of personal and psychological
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qualities as a dimension of employability was evident in responses relating to organizations of all sizes and types but was particularly evident in the expectations of interviewees who had specialist HR graduate employment experience. For example, *“For us the more important thing is those behavioural aspects, so less about the knowledge perhaps, although that does play some part, and more about the experience of doing that course regardless of what course it was: ‘what are the personal qualities and traits and experiences that you’ve had in that experience that’s going to help you succeed here?’”* (E7).

Personal brand expectations

Personal and psychological qualities such as resilience, adaptability, confidence and relationship management are not amenable to objective assessment but our data indicate that employers respond empathetically to signals of desirable personal demeanour, dispositions and psychological qualities. For example, *“They are confident in their own abilities and they tend to know what they want to achieve and what they can achieve and they tend to be – they tend to be quite, or very self-motivated and they put more than enough pressure on themselves to perform and do the job”* (E1). Another employer indicated: *“demonstrating that you have a degree of ‘nouse’, common sense, the ability to adapt, ask questions. Everything comes back to that question in mind ... you want someone who can demonstrate that they’re willing to go the extra mile...you want that injection of enthusiasm into an organisation”* (E8). A further example of this is: *“I think they're all pieces of the jigsaw... the experience, the attitude, the qualities, the experience of the candidate all make up, when I say package ...*

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3 *what we're looking for is the potential and ...to be able to identify that range of experience*
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5 *and that's our potential"* (E9).
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9 Although qualities such as these are difficult to discern, our analysis suggests that
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11 employers respond positively to narratives grounded in work-related experience. Our analysis
12
13 suggests that these provide the basis for compelling narratives from which employers infer
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15 personal brand assets that they construct as standout employability signals. One interviewee
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17 expressed the value of narratives from areas of work-related experience as *"incredibly*
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19 *exciting because (a) it shows understanding, (b) it shows a curiosity (3) it humours us that*
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21 *they actually really want to know: all that sort of stuff"* (E18). Another interviewee indicated
22
23 the compelling nature of signals located in work related and applied contexts : *"and I just*
24
25 *thought 'man, that is so effective; this guy's done his research, he knows what we're about,*
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27 *he's thought long and hard about it.' It must've taken him a week to put that together so that*
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29 *was impressive. So that sort of thing"* (E19).
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35 Our analysis of the data suggests, therefore, that employers' framing of standout
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37 employability does not ascribe substantial value to qualifications and credentials *per se*.
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39 However, the value of degree level qualifications is enhanced when combined with a
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41 narrative suggestive of a personal brand that incorporates subjective, psychological qualities,
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43 that employers can interpret as a signal of a graduate's potential to 'belong' within the
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45 organization. For example, *"The level of degree that they've got is less important to us these*
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47 *days; we'd think twice about taking someone who's only attained a third but a 2:2 or above*
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49 *we would consider if [it] matched with the most important thing for us, which is relevant*
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51 *work experience"* (E8) and *"my business partnerwill check their technical skills.... and*
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53 *then I will make sure that they're a good fit for the team and that they understand what we're*
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55 *doing and that their motivations are aligned with our own"* (E18).
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The signaling power of work related experience

Work-related experience represents an important dimension of employers' framing of employability whether achieved through work placements, internships or from other means of gaining knowledge of organizational or sectoral contexts. The data suggest that the signaling utility of work experience arises from employers' inferences about a likely 'connection' between a graduate with their organization's culture which they associate with qualities of advanced work and client readiness. One interviewee, for example, commented that: *"You have to be tough in this job, you know; you're going to get... People can be, clients can be pretty nasty. And yeah, so resilience is important"* (E14). Another interviewee reflected on the importance of signals suggesting congruence with organizational culture and values, *"it's really important that they're familiar with the leadership principles ...So we do need to see some desire to want to take that culture on and to understand the leadership principles ... That's something that we press against"* (E11) and: *"I don't know if you know much about ... culture, but [our] whole mindset is that nobody is brilliant on their own, you're brilliant together. And you're never the best, you're together with other people, they've helped you become better"* (E13).

To summarise, as depicted in Figure 1, our analysis of signals associated with standout employability indicates that work-related experiential narratives provide an important basis from which employers can infer organizational readiness and cultural chemistry, for example: *"I mean if they demonstrate ... that they've really gone out of the way to network or meet us, or really demonstrated a commitment to wanting to work at ...yes their scores in that space will be higher"* (E7).

Signaling Person-Organization Fit

Our analysis indicates the importance of person-organization fit as a dimension of employers' expectations. Employers from all types of organizations indicated the importance

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3 they attached to graduates signals associated with ‘fitting in with our team’ and being likely
4 to form good relationships with clients as features of their employability expectations.
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8 An interviewee from a larger organization reflected that: *We’re so hot on fit,*
9 *personality fit and culture fit and things. So that’s probably the key stage”* (E13). Another
10 interviewee considered *“it is important that they will fit with the culture and, as a company,*
11 *we try to be transparent and honest and it’s bad for business for us if we’re trying to deceive,*
12 *obviously we don’t want to do that. It’s not the kind of company we want to be”* (E16).
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20 Signals relevant to a fit between individual and organizational mind-set or values also form
21 part of employers’ expectations. For example, *“No. I think instead of the word ‘culture’ I’d*
22 *use the word ‘values’ so there are certain values that the organisation hold, which I think are*
23 *in common with a lot of organisational values i.e. welcoming, equal and fair, anti sex*
24 *discrimination or gender discrimination. Those sorts of things are terrifically embedded in ...*
25 *organisation. Tolerant, fair minded, you know, those characteristics”* (E19) and *“So we want*
26 *people to come and work with us, understand what we do, make a difference to themselves*
27 *and to the business”* (E12).
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39 In addition to expectations that graduates will be able to signal a fit with the culture
40 and values of the organization, the data also indicate further idealization in employers’
41 expectations of a distinctive future contribution by those graduates that they deem to have the
42 qualities of standout employability. For example, *“So what we tend to look for in a graduate*
43 *recruitment campaign is much more the intangible behavioural stuff, the potential of their*
44 *behaviours and them as a person”* (E7) and *“So, we’re looking for potential leadership*
45 *management and holistic skills, and then taking that on and training up to be an engineer”*
46 (E4). The data suggest that social fit with future clients, colleagues and other organizational
47 stakeholders features in employers’ framing of person-organization fit. One employer
48 expressed this in the following terms, *“We look for people who are personable and who*
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3 *might be able to build relationships with their colleagues and with their potential customers*
4 *and candidates, so having good social skills is very, very important. Good communication*
5 *skills are perhaps top of the list for us. And they need a bit of steel to them” (E5).*
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11 Such qualities are not amenable to objective assessment. However, interviewees
12
13 described compelling signals of standout person-organization fit. Graduates’ networks and
14
15 connections represent one important signaling mechanism. The graduate recruitment
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17 specialist (E3) described this as: “*so actually it’s understanding where you come from, where*
18 *you want to go, what you can exchange, how you need to learn, the forming professional*
19 *networks: again that’s aligned to working with people and getting things done through other*
20 *people”*. Our analysis also suggests that work experience is a powerful narrative basis for
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22 skilled social action from which employers infer qualities such as passion, appropriate values
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24 and fit with the organization. For example, “*We’re not going to take a graduate who just has*
25 *a degree. We’d never do it. So ... we’re looking between one and two years’ experience. That*
26 *could have been part-time, that can be internships. We just need to see a thread. We’re not*
27 *going to accept them ... unless we see that they’ve had a passion for ... over the last three*
28 *years basically” (E13) and “I think the grads who are likely to gravitate towards us would*
29 *be ones who’ve done sales jobs in their holidays and tried to set up a little business on e-bay*
30 *while they’re at uni and that sort of person” (E10). One employer expressed this as: “So like*
31 *I said before, have they done any little projects of their own outside of university? Maybe*
32 *they have an entrepreneurial streak and they’ve tried to set up their own company, or they’ve*
33 *worked as a consultant or just helped family members or whatever build websites or*
34 *programmes for other people” (E15). Another reflected, “I mean if they’re interested in*
35 *operations it’s always great to see work experience that’s related to operations and it’s really*
36 *good to see that they’ve gone out of their way to get involved in different societies or different*
37 *types of work experience throughout their degree. So there isn’t one particular thing that we*
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3 *need to see but it's great to see that they're proactive and they've got like a bias of action"*
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5 (E11).

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Employers also regard work related experience as a signal of future potential, for example, *"So if somebody has gone in their own free time to do these extra projects, and they've followed it through, then that shows to us that they are motivated and enjoy the work and they are more likely to stick and enjoy what we do and will have the potential of becoming the best in their field, which is what we're looking to employ"* (E18).

The additional benefit of an extended back-story

In addition to work-related experience, our data also indicate the utility, from the employers' perspective, of extra curricula activities and experiences, which form an important signaling mechanism associated with standout employability. One interviewee expressed this in these terms: *"People who come straight from university have not got all the life experiences that you would want from someone... you do need to have some life experiences behind you"* (E4) and *"So we would look at sciences or more traditional degrees and a little bit on the grade they've got... and then sort of Duke of Edinburgh and sort of pastimes; you know, sort of club captain or sports captain of a team or of a group within university. You know that all sort of shows leadership skills so we sort of look for a rounded individual"* (E1). Another employer reflected that, *"What really matters to us is what else they've done alongside their degree, and if it's somebody that has worked part-time, had done voluntary work, has been very heavily involved in societies, in clubs, sports, and things like that"* (E2) and *"We get the best insights from the nuggets, and usually it's the little comments between stories about something they did outside of uni or their summer jobThose experiences are far more – it's going to sound awful – grounded in reality, whose context is more relevant and more real"* (E7).

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3 To summarize, our analysis suggests that narratives suggestive of an extended
4
5 ‘back-story’ produce meaning for employers from which empathetic relationships can be
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7 invoked and standout employability can be signaled. One employer expressed this as, “*Top*
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9 *graduate would be passionate about everything he does, not just in his subject, but in his life*
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11 *and his goals and focus or her I should say*” (E15). In addition to work-experience, therefore,
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13 experiences beyond work contexts represent compelling signals, from employers’
14
15 perspectives, of standout employability. Narratives and skilful social action grounded in non-
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17 work related experiences provide employers with the opportunity to construct interpretations
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19 of standout employability linked with personal attributes and potential that are not amenable
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21 to other forms of objective assessment.
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28 Discussion

29 Employers constitute the primary ‘audience’, ‘receivers’ and evaluators of signals of
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31 employability (Forrier, De Cuyper, & Akkermans, 2018). The context for our study is the
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33 congested and contested arena of the graduate labour market, which creates challenges for
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35 employers whose construction of standout employability must enable them to differentiate
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37 between equally qualified and skilled graduates. In this article, through focusing on
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39 employers’ expectations, we address a limitation in the graduate employability literature and
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41 policy that focuses on supply-side issues. This approach places responsibility on Universities
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43 to ‘deliver’ employability skills and on individuals to manage their own employability. The
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45 article adds a demand-side perspective by drawing attention to employers’ employability
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47 expectations and agency. We identify the dimensions of employers’ employability
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49 expectations and the expectations they have for compelling signals of standout employability.
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51 We further contribute a novel analysis of the role of skilful social action in employability
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53 construction, and specifically we contribute a timely explanation of the value of non-HE
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55 experience as a feature of employers’ construction of standout employability.
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3 The article offers three contributions to scholarship in the field of graduate
4 employability. First, the article extends critiques of Human Capital theory that assumes that
5 employability is determined by graduates' possession of technical and non-technical skills
6 and resources acquired during Higher Education. Although cognitive, non-cognitive and
7 technical skills and credentials that feature in checklists in much of the employability
8 literature are evident in employers' descriptions of dimensions of employability, our study
9 confirms that these represent no more than a threshold of eligibility for the graduate labour
10 market. Brown and Hesketh's study into graduate selection processes (2004, p.92)
11 characterized employers' decisions about graduate employability as 'stylized, commodified,
12 and ultimately embodied within individuals in such a way as to render the process of
13 selecting individuals in the labour market process open to new levels of subjectivity'.
14 Subsequent studies have further indicated that 'what graduates are' – referred to by Ingram
15 and Allen (2018) as 'social magic' is valorized by employers over credentials that they
16 possess (Ashley, et al., 2016; McCracken et al., 2016).

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36 Our analysis adds original value to understanding the means by which employers'
37 identify and evaluate subjective qualities they associate with standout employability,
38 something that is not well explained in the literature. Drawing on signaling theory (Connelly
39 et al, 2011; Spence, 1973) the first contribution of this article is to add important knowledge
40 about the subjective and asymmetrical informational process from which employers identify
41 personal and intangible qualities such as talent, creativity, dynamism, and potential that they
42 associate with standout employability

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53 Second, we extend the processual conceptualization of graduate employability
54 through theorizing the role of skilful social action as the basis for employers' interpretive and
55 framing processes that enable them to infer standout employability. Third, our analysis
56 contributes new understanding of the employability value of work and non-work experience
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3 outside HE and how these work as signaling devices that convey skilled social action, and
4 therefore future potential. Wilton's (2012) study into work experience and employability
5 suggests that, whilst quantitative data from employers and students supports a positive
6 assessment of the potential benefits of work placements, qualitative data indicates a more
7 complex relationship between prior experience and graduate labour market outcomes. In
8 addition, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) found no significant association between
9 work experience and employability. Weiss et al (2014) further identify different effects for
10 different forms of experience at the point of transition from university to employment and for
11 longer-term employability outcomes. Their study concluded that, although experience and
12 voluntary activities that are unrelated to a graduate's field of study may help graduates to
13 achieve integration into the labour market, there is no significant link to their enhanced career
14 progression.

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32 Our theorization of the dynamics by which employers construct employability and
33 differentiate between graduates at the point of transition from HE to employment adds
34 important knowledge in this area. It explains how employers infer standout employability
35 qualities from narratives of skilled social action generated in non-HE contexts. The
36 theoretical integration of skilful social action with signaling theory provides an important
37 new theorization of the dramaturgical process through which employers recognize and
38 respond to signals they associate with idealized attributes of standout employability.

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47 Goffman's (1974) dramaturgical perspective indicates the potential value of employability
48 performances that enable employers to infer and empathise with features of graduate's life
49 experience beyond the limitations of 'the script' concerned with employment and work-
50 related skills and abilities. This article shows that, from the employers' perspective, work
51 experience or other non-HE experiences *per se* have limited value in relation to employers'
52 dramaturgical circumspection and dramaturgical loyalty expectations. It contributes an
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3 important conceptualization of employers' expectations of a narrative of skilful action
4 grounded in non-HE experience from which they infer can infer a 'complete package' of
5 situationally relevant interpersonal and cultural attributes suggestive of a graduate's
6 organizational 'fit' and belonging. This extends the processual understanding of the
7 dynamics of the construction of standout graduate employability grounded in narration of
8 non-HE experience from which employers decode signals of intangible personal, social and
9 psychological qualities. What is important is that the narrative is skilfully grounded in
10 experiences of social action that resonates with employers' own contexts and backgrounds,
11 and not the experience *per se*, from which standout employability is constructed. Our
12 theorization explains the paradoxical connection, in the employability literature of the
13 signaling utility of work related and non-work related experience as a feature of standout
14 employability. Ingram and Allen (2018) suggest that employers' constructions of
15 employability involve a conception of the workplace as in some ways an extension of their
16 home / social environment. Our article indicates that constructions of standout employability
17 require that employers can infer personal, social and cultural signals from experiential
18 narratives with which they can empathise and interpret as aligning with their own interests
19 and frames. Graduates' experiences beyond HE are valuable employability assets only if
20 skilfully narrated and framed so that employers connote them as resonant with their own
21 social or organizational contexts.

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48 Third, we make an important contribution to theory by integrating signaling theory
49 and the concept of skilful social action. We present an integrated conceptualization of
50 employers' expectations of standout employability, which explains the processual dynamics
51 from which employers frame signals they associate with standout employability. This
52 provides the basis for explaining the relationship between informational signaling related to
53 dimensions of employability and contextually located skilful social action narratives. These
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3 two features, signals and narrations, dynamically interact with each other. Both signaling and
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5 skilful social action are important, in combination, for employers' construction of standout
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7 employability. Therefore, we propose that the integration of signaling theory with the concept
8
9 of skilful social action offers an important contribution to theorising graduate employability.
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13 **Limitations and further research**

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16 Research into employability crosses multiple disciplinary boundaries, including
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18 HRM, careers and education. In such a widespread field, the analysis of sub-sets of larger
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20 data sets can underpin valid explorations of different features of employability experiences
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22 and outcomes (see, for example, Wilton, 2007; Wilton, Wilton, 2008; Wilton, Wilton, 2011;
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24 Wilton, 2012). This article reports a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interview data
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26 drawn from a wider study into learning gain in HE. Investigation of work related or other
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28 experience was not an explicitly operationalized aim of the larger project from which our data
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30 set is drawn. However, our abductive stance and immersion in the interview data indicated
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32 the importance of different forms of experience as important for employer expectations of
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34 standout employability. Our abductive openness to theoretical possibilities (Rinehart, 2020)
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36 has enabled a plausible and novel analysis of employers' construction of standout
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38 employability that aligns with Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) three criteria for rigour in
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40 qualitative abductive analysis: fit between evidence and theoretical claims, reasonableness of
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42 analytical interpretation through comparison with existing theories, and relevance in relation
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44 to the work field. The abductive recursive analytical approach led to the identification of the
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46 differential signaling value attached by employers to skilful employability performances
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48 grounded in experiential narratives.
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56 As a process that is exploratory, our analysis invites some speculation about potential
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58 inferences that merit further research. First, in drawing attention to the importance of
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narration grounded in work related experience, internships, and other voluntary or life experiences, there are implications for employability associated with socio-economic advantage. In an overcrowded labour market, successful signaling of standout employability by one graduate will always be at the expense of others (Forrier et al., 2018). Further examination is required into the relationship between employers' signaling expectations of idealized personal, social and cultural qualities with the diversity and inclusion intentions of HRM policies and systems (Ingram & Allen, 2018). Whilst life experience is not confined to any one social group, further research is needed into the relationship between employers' expectations and their responses to the narrative 'voices' of graduates from different socio-economic groups.

Second, Weiss, *et al* (2014) suggest that work related experience has significant signaling utility at the point of initial transition from university to employment but is not associated with enhanced career progression or higher rewards beyond the short term. Our findings indicate the importance of employers' social, cultural and organizational expectations as consequential for their employability signaling responsiveness. However, further research is needed into employability development beyond the immediate transition in to employment (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Krouwel, Van Luijn, & Zweekhorst, 2019). Our conceptualization of signaling through skilled social action would provide a fruitful basis for longitudinal examination of the interactive processes involved in graduates' career development, [talent management](#), and internal organizational employability trajectories in workplace contexts (Silzer & Church, 2009; Meyers, 2020).

Implications

[In an overcrowded graduate labour market where supply of graduates exceeds organizational demand for graduate level recruits, employers face the difficult task of distinguishing between graduates with similar skills, qualifications and accomplishments. In](#)

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3 this section we focus on the implications of our study for HE institutions, career counsellors,
4 graduate recruiters, and career development and HRD practitioners.
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8 At the level of HE institutions, it is important that relevant practitioners such as
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10 careers counsellors encourage graduates to develop experientially referenced narratives as a
11 basis from which to communicate congruence with employers' social and organizational
12 contexts. Employability programmes in HE institutions should focus on helping students to
13 embellish their narratives of experience as part of work-integrated learning programmes and
14 structured work experience. This can enable them to meet employers signaling expectations
15 and provide the basis from which employers can infer personal brand assets they associate
16 with standout employability.
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27 In terms of diversity and inclusion, our study indicates that graduate recruiters'
28 reliance on signals from which idealized personal, social and cultural qualities are inferred
29 may unwittingly limit the achievement of equality of opportunities and social inclusivity.
30 Employer engagement with HE institutions and provision of meaningful work experience,
31 paid internships and mentoring processes can provide a more equitable means by which
32 graduates from less advantaged contexts can benefit from experiential opportunities that they
33 can use to signal their value in a crowded graduate labour market.
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44 Our study also has implications for career development and HRD practitioners
45 concerned with the sustained employability and organizational contribution of recently
46 recruited graduates. Research indicates the importance of continued and clearly signaled
47 career development opportunities for graduate retention (Akkermans, et al., 2019; Clarke,
48 2017). Our study indicates that, in addition, further development of graduate recruits' skilful
49 social action capabilities may be required in order to support ongoing internal employability
50 development beyond the point of their transition into the organization.
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Conclusion

Employability is an important concept for employers, policy makers and educationalists. In many national contexts, universities have developed a range of graduate employability strategies within their curricula designed to facilitate the transition of graduates from university into employment. However, employers' represent the primary evaluators of graduate employability. Grounded in a dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1974), this article [extends](#) the processual approach to employability (Holmes, 2013).

In the university to employment transition employers fulfil the role of 'talent spotters' who must evaluate graduates' employability performances. [In giving 'voice' to the perspective and expectations of employers, the article shows the limitations of the possessional approach to explaining employability \(Holmes, 2013\) and the Human Capital theory assumptions in which it is grounded. The principal contribution of the article is realised through the integration of signaling theory \(Spence, 1973\) with the concept of skilled social action \(Fligstein, 2001\) as a basis to theorize employers' construction and framing of standout employability signals. This conceptual integration provides the basis for new knowledge about the subjective and asymmetrical informational process from which employers identify personal and intangible qualities that they associate with standout employability. It further contributes an important extension to the processual conceptualization of graduate employability through theorizing the role of skilled social action as a basis from which employers infer and respond to signals of subjective qualities that they interpret as indicators of standout employability. This enables us to explain the function of non-HE experience as a feature of the dynamic processes involved in the construction of standout employability. It shows that work and other experience are valuable as a backdrop for the dramaturgical performance of graduate employability and not for skill development opportunities or the enablement of work ready behaviours. Moreover, it shows](#)

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3 that the signaling value of work or other experience requires skilful narration and framing
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5 from which employers can infer a shared social context, respond with empathy, and interpret
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7 as aligning with their own or their organization's contexts and as signals of potential
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9 organizational belonging.
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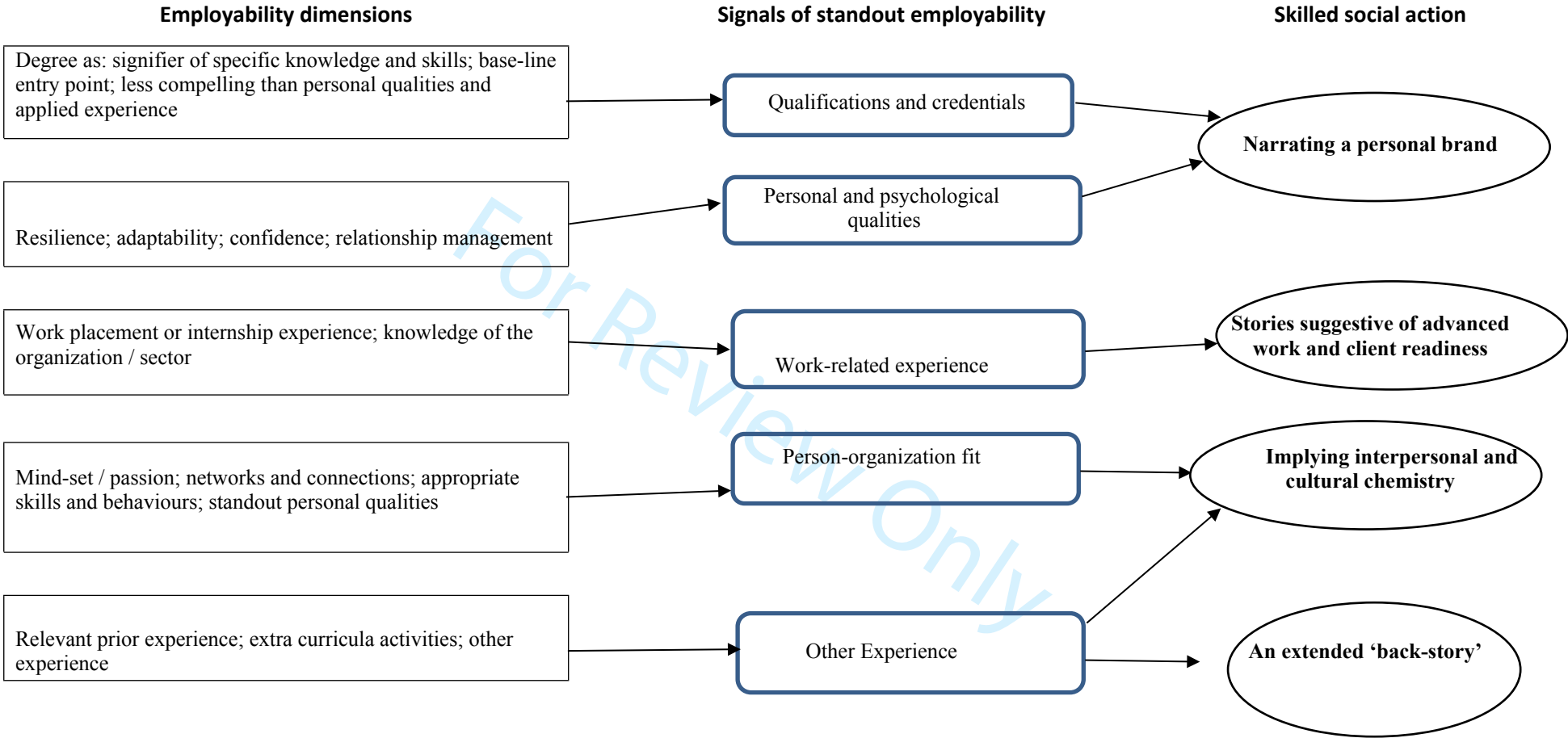
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Table 1: Participant Organizations

ID	Sector	Size: ¹ S/M/L	Role of Interviewer (HR specialist / non-specialist)	Regular / occasional graduate recruitment
1	Recruitment	M	Non-specialist	Regular
2	Sales	L	Specialist	Regular
3	Pilot	S	N/A	N/A
4	Engineering	L	Specialist	Regular
5	Recruitment	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
6	Construction	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
7	Data management	L	Specialist	Regular
8	Legal services	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
9	Teacher training	S	Specialist	Regular
10	Recruitment	S	Specialist	Regular
11	Logistics	L	Specialist	Regular
12	Data management	M	Specialist	Occasional
13	Fashion	L	Specialist	Regular
14	Design	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
15	Information and Communications	L	Non-specialist	Regular
16	Leisure	L	Non-specialist	Occasional
17	Charity	M	Specialist	Regular
18	Information and Communications	S	Non-specialist	Occasional
19	Creative	S	Non-specialist	Occasional

¹ Small = fewer than 50 employees; medium = 51-500 employees; large = 500+ employees

Figure 1: Standout graduate employability: the employers' perspective



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