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Employer perspectives on professional identity and its role in graduate recruitment

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ABSTRACT

Practice and theory on graduate employability continues to recognise the importance of professional identity (PI) as a key determinant of individuals perceived and realised worth in the labour market. However, studies are predominantly from student, graduate and academic perspectives with little exploration of employers' perceptions on PI and its importance for graduates' acculturation into practice and workplace outcomes. Accordingly, we explored employer perspectives on what PI means and what it signals during graduate recruitment. Using closed and open response questions, we gathered survey data from 339 employers closely involved in recruiting, developing, supervising and performance managing graduates in Australia. We examined the importance of *familiarity*, *proximity*, *experience*, and *professional self-efficacy* as dimensions of PI and their influence on early career graduates' learning, performance and wellbeing in the workplace, as understood by employers. We also investigated what PI signalled during recruitment, how it was assessed and its capacity to predict specified workplace outcomes. Findings advance the conceptual framing of PI and our understanding of its role in graduate recruitment, informing practical strategies for careers professionals and educators to support higher education students in their transition to work.

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Professional identity; employability; signalling theory; graduate recruitment; person-organisation fit

Introduction

Practice and theory on graduate employability continues to recognise the importance of professional identity (PI) as a key determinant of individuals' perceived and realised worth in the labour market. PI is how the individual understands, defines and relates their attitudes, beliefs, values and norms to professional life, their 'sense-of-professional self' (Ibarra 1999). Theorising on PI emphasises how individuals continually (re)negotiate their PI through interactions with different work contexts, questioning and reflecting on their legitimate connection between self and profession(s), and making sense of who they are and who they are becoming (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley 2008, 2018). This work reveals the complexities of PI as a multi-dimensional construct spanning individuals' socialisation in professional norms, values and behaviours; their sense of belonging, connection and alignment with the profession; and confidence in themselves as a legitimate practitioner at work (Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017; Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012).

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Extant literature highlights the non-linear, fluid and often challenging journey of higher education (HE) students seeking to become professionals, illustrated by Reissner and Armitage-Chan's (2024) typology of the coexisting states of *becoming* (PI as a process of learning and development), *aligning* (allying personal and professional self), *exploring* (understanding who they want to be), and *struggling* (trying to meaningfully form PI). Also illuminated is the connection between identity formation and personal resources, characteristics and circumstances (e.g. Fitzgerald et al. 2024) and the power of the learning context which can affirm and foster, or negate and discourage, HE students' PI (Dempsey, Healy, and Linehan 2024; Jackson 2017). Such work is helpful in identifying strategies fostering PI and improving graduate employability, particularly experiential, authentic learning activities such as university-endorsed internships (e.g. Jackson 2017; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021).

Although studies on PI continue to emerge from student, graduate and academic perspectives (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012), there is relatively little exploration of how employers interpret PI and its importance for graduates' acculturation into practice and their workplace outcomes. This viewpoint is important given employers' role as gatekeepers to graduates' successful transition into roles and the power of their policies, practice and organisational culture in shaping graduates' experiences, learning, wellbeing and – ultimately – their success at work (Akkermans, Tomlinson, and Anderson 2024). As PI builds confidence, know-how and motivation for further development to aid transition to work (Jensen and Jetten 2016; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021), one would expect it to feature in graduate recruitment. Indeed, aspects of PI appear in graduate selection criteria, such as professionalism, confidence, and discipline-related skills and knowledge (Jackson 2016; Nadelson et al. 2015) and highly desired professional capabilities such as communication and collaboration (e.g. Humburg and Van der Velden 2015; Tomlinson and Anderson 2021). However, the value placed on other aspects, such as professional disposition, socialisation in communities of practice, congruence between personal and professional self, and a sense of belonging with the profession (Ibarra 1999; Jackson 2016), is less understood. This indicates an opportunity to investigate how PI features in graduate recruitment and the potential for more useful integration to enhance selection outcomes, including person-organisation fit.

Accordingly, we explored employer perspectives on the nature and role of PI, theoretically framed by signalling theory (Spence 1973), and what a well-formed PI indicates regarding graduates' potential workplace performance and person-organisation fit in the early years of employment. We posed two research questions. First, how is PI conceptualised among graduate employers? Second, in what ways does it provide employers with signals about graduates' future workplace potential that inform their recruitment decisions? We generated novel insights through surveying 339 employers closely involved in recruiting, developing, supervising and performance managing graduates in Australia. Findings advance the conceptual framing of PI, including its different dimensions and how they relate to each other, and inform institutional strategies to strengthen graduates' PI to improve transition to employment and wellbeing, learning and cultural fit at work. Our research also reveals PI's role in graduate recruitment to inform HE careers provision to aid students' career success.

Background

Meaning and importance of PI

HE literature has gradually shifted away from employer-based surveys of the skills that graduates need, possess and utilise (Tomlinson and Jackson 2021) that reproduce 'thin' notions of employability. Departure from narrow, skills-based approaches to employability has encouraged richer conceptualisations (Jackson 2016) which emphasise career development learning (Bridgstock 2009), social and cultural capital resources (Tomlinson 2017), and personal factors such as adaptability (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004), aspirations, drive and dependability (Branine 2008). PI is also recognised as an important aspect of employability which can build graduates' confidence, self-belief, knowledge and capability for a more effective transition to working life (Jackson 2016; Trede, Macklin,

and Bridges 2012). It is a complex, dynamic phenomenon which involves a continual negotiation between self and context and develops in a non-uniform way (Dempsey, Healy, and Linehan 2024) over an individual's career, often disrupted by external factors and personal circumstances (Jackson 2016; Toubassi et al. 2023).

Broadly understood as multi-faceted, we draw on earlier studies to explore four dimensions to PI. The first relates to graduates becoming socialised in appropriate conduct, practices and standards of workplace behaviour, internalising professional norms, values and beliefs, and understanding expected roles and responsibilities (Dall'Alba 2009; Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017), described as *familiarity* (Tomlinson and Jackson 2021). A second aspect, *proximity* (Tomlinson and Jackson 2021), relates to graduates' contacts in the profession, feeling a legitimate sense of belonging with the profession's values and practices, and gaining meaning and satisfaction from their work and aspiring to succeed (Dempsey, Healy, and Linehan 2024; Ibarra 1999). The third dimension is *experience* (Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017) where graduates have engaged meaningfully with professionals through – for example – prior work, study, and interest group or community membership. These interactions allow graduates to negotiate their views, behaviours and attitudes in authentic contexts, trial their professional selves, and have their constructed identity legitimised by others (Dempsey, Healy, and Linehan 2024; Ibarra 1999; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021), critical to 'becoming' professionals. Finally, *professional self-efficacy* (Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017) refers to graduates confidently demonstrating skills and knowledge expected in professional practice, feeling prepared for working life and understanding the challenges it may pose (Inceoglu et al. 2019; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021).

There are multiple employability-related benefits from a well-formed PI. Graduates' identifying as an emerging professional enhances self-confidence in capabilities and preparedness for work, strengthening self-perceived employability and employment outcomes (Grosemans et al. 2023). Their increased self-awareness and better grasp of professional self can aid a strong, coherent employability narrative to persuade prospective employers of their accomplishments and person-organisation fit (Jackson 2016; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021), improving recruitment outcomes. Proximity through established networks may bring labour market advantage via the hidden job market (English et al. 2021) while PI formed during authentic curriculum-based learning experiences (e.g. internships) and relevant paid work are highly regarded by employers and can enhance labour market outcomes (Jackson 2024). PI can also improve graduates' workplace learning and performance, heightened familiarity with practice enabling graduates to adapt more quickly while mobilised networks support knowledge sharing and mentorship. Increased motivation to succeed could instil greater curiosity and more proactive investment in developmental activities, becoming critical learners that contribute to the profession (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012). PI's illumination of the value and meaning of work may also help graduates to rationalise their efforts and gain a sense of purpose (Jensen and Jetten 2016), enhancing motivation, belonging and wellbeing (Toubassi et al. 2023).

PI and recruitment

Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) emphasised the importance of PI during graduate recruitment, 'the more congruent emergent identities are with the actual identities they will need to operationalise in the labour market, the more successful a graduate may be in negotiating entry and convincing employers that they are the appropriate person for a given role' (p.887). They asserted that graduates' proximity between themselves and their targeted organisation will support them in decoding language and messaging during recruitment and communicating congruence between their own values, behaviours, priorities and aspirations and the goals and culture of the organisation. Holmes (2015) also illuminated the importance of graduate recruits accurately and persuasively presenting themselves in a way that affirms their claims of being 'worthy' for roles. Others also subscribe to the importance of graduates demonstrating cultural capital during recruitment,

aligning with notions of ideal candidates and a 'cultural matching process' (Rivera 2012), although sometimes excluding certain groups (Gebreiter 2019; Hora 2020). Accordingly, Holmes emphasised 'identity warranting' during recruitment where significant others (e.g. human resource professionals) are gatekeepers who affirm, or discard, graduates' identities. Graduates must therefore develop a convincing profile on their familiarity, proximity, experience and professional self-efficacy (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004; Tomlinson 2017) and congruence with the organisational culture.

Investigation of employability narratives during recruitment shows employers value graduates linking achievements and experiences with labour market value (e.g. Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021) which, unfortunately, many graduates do not develop effectively (Jorre de St Jorre and & Oliver 2018). Yet we need a greater understanding of what a developed PI signals to employers and, consequently, how PI features during recruitment, the value placed on it, and how it is assessed. Spence (1973) recognises that while the degree qualification suggests potential capabilities and knowledge, more salient signals are needed for selecting graduates with good person-organisation fit to reduce the information asymmetry concerning a job candidate's potential. Accordingly, Tomlinson and Anderson asserted that the degree qualification brings cognitive and technical signals of candidates' suitability while their interests, values and motivations provide additional insights on person-organisation fit.

In line with its four dimensions, potential positive signals from PI could be relevant work experience, inferring internalisation of professional norms, values and behaviours and readiness for expected tasks in the graduate role. A relevant discipline study may signal mastery of technical skills and knowledge and infer quality talent (McCracken, Currie, and Harrison 2016). Another signal could be active participation in professional bodies or communities of practice where students/graduates are exposed to shared beliefs, practices and ways-of-working through connecting with other practitioners and role models (Lave and Wenger 1991), instrumental to forming PI (Jackson 2016; Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017). Other signals validating congruence with the profession and person-organisation fit could be authentic network contacts and participation in other activities that aid internalising relevant values and beliefs (Tomlinson and Anderson 2021), such as volunteering. While some have indicated these signals are used in graduate recruitment (e.g. Hora 2020; McCracken, Currie, and Harrison 2016), they do not appear to be explicitly associated with graduates' PI formation. We actively address this gap in this article.

Methodology

Here, we explain how we designed our research to answer the following two questions: (i) how is PI conceptualised among graduate employers? and (ii) in what ways does PI provide employers with signals about graduates' future workplace potential that inform their recruitment decisions?

Participants

Table 1 summarises the sample's personal and work characteristics. There were marginally more females than males, employers came from different industries, and around two-thirds were from micro, small or medium organisations. Regarding representativeness, the proportion of respondents from large organisations (around one-third) is not dissimilar to the 43% of the Australian labour force reported as working in large organisations, and the three-quarters based in the private sector equates to national reporting (Australian Bureau Statistics 2025).

Procedures

Following ethics approval, we invited Australian-based employers to participate in an online survey via a third-party panel provider. The panel provider targeted an employer sample using pre-

Table 1. Summary of participant characteristics.

Variable	Sub-variable	N	%
Gender	Male	153	45.1
	Female	186	54.9
	Transgender	0	0
	Gender neutral	0	0
	Non-binary	0	0
	None of above	0	0
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Age	<24 years	15	4.9
	25–34 years	97	31.4
	35–44 years	87	28.2
	45–54 years	62	20.1
	55/over years	48	15.2
Employer size	Micro (1–4 employees)	20	5.9
	Small (5–19 employees)	54	15.9
	Medium (20–199 employees)	155	45.7
	Large (200 + employees)	110	32.4
Employer sector	Public	74	21.8
	Private	246	72.6
	Not-for-profit	19	5.6
Employer industry	Hospitality/retail	36	10.6
	Finance/insurance/administration	34	10.0
	Primary/manufacturing/mining/utilities/construction	48	14.2
	Education/training	39	11.5
	Healthcare	69	20.4
	Professional/scientific/technical services	65	19.2
	Logistics/wholesale/transport/safety	48	14.2

established recruitment criteria and did not draw on our own institutions' contracts. Our recruitment criteria were staff in business/commerce-related roles in diverse organisation types (size/sector/industry), and who had close involvement in recruiting, developing, supervising, and/or performance managing graduates who had completed degrees in any discipline within the past five years. We gathered survey data during March 2025.

Measures

We asked respondents to indicate their involvement with graduates, choosing from recruitment and selection, learning and development, day-to-day supervision, and performance management (allowing multiple selection) and their years of engaging with graduates in these ways. To explore the meaning of PI, we requested respondents rate the importance of four dimensions (five-point scale) derived from extant literature. We used five items for *familiarity* and seven items for *proximity*, each developed and validated by Tomlinson and Jackson (2021) in their study of 433 graduates in the UK and Australia. We adapted the five items for *experience* and four items for *professional self-efficacy* employed in Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt's (2017) PI scale, validated by 1,295 HE students in Singapore.

To investigate the importance of PI, we asked respondents to consider the four dimensions' relative importance for early career graduates' workplace learning. Using a constant sum approach, participants assigned a score out of 100 to show the relative importance of each dimension, totalling 100% across all four dimensions. We used the same constant-sum approach to gauge the dimensions' relative importance for performance and wellbeing at work. To better understand the assigned scores, we asked participants to explain their percentage allocations for each workplace outcome using open responses. We then required them to complete two open response questions related to research question two. First, why is PI attractive to graduate recruiters during selection processes? Second, how is PI assessed during recruitment and selection, including any use of AI-driven tools? To deepen our insights on the role of PI, we gave respondents the option to add additional comments on the level of importance placed on PI during

recruitment. We then asked participants to rate how helpful an applicant's PI was for predicting six workplace outcomes (see Results) using a five-point scale. The survey instrument is provided as a supplemental file.

Analysis

Survey rating data

We analysed the survey rating data using SPSS 30.0. Harman's single-factor test produced a seven-factor solution accounting for 62.2% of variance. The one-factor solution explained only 28.1% of the variance, alleviating concerns for common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Preliminary analysis indicated data were normal with kurtosis ranging from – 1.198–1.309, and skewness from −1.065 to −.275 (Kline 1998). Each dimension's Cronbach alpha exceeded 0.8 (see Results) and principal components analysis indicated dimensions' validity with single-factor solutions and factor scores ranging from .668 – .779 (*familiarity*), .671 – .796 (*proximity*), .418 – .861 (*experience*) and .779 – .848 (*professional self-efficacy*).

For the first research question (meaning and importance of PI), we computed percentages, means and standard deviations for each dimension's items and a composite average. We examined correlations between dimensions and used multiple linear regression to investigate associations between the importance of each dimension (using the composite average) and respondents' personal (gender/age/years' experience) and work (organisation size/sector/industry) characteristics, producing three regression models. We compared predictor variables' mean scores at the item level, where warranted. We also calculated means and standard deviations for the constant sum data, indicating participants' average score on the relative importance of each dimension for workplace learning, performance and wellbeing. For the second research question (strategic signalling of PI during recruitment), we computed means and standard deviations for how helpful a graduate applicant's PI was for predicting the six workplace outcomes.

Survey open response data

We used an inductive thematic analysis approach to identify patterns in respondents' open responses with coding undertaken manually in Microsoft Excel. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six phases of thematic analysis, one researcher read the open responses to identify reoccurring ideas and create initial codes, which they grouped by similarity into overarching themes. A second researcher undertook the same process, and a structured codebook recorded points of overlap and separation in thinking. These were discussed until the final codes and themes were agreed upon. Participant quotes illustrate the generated themes.

For respondents' explanations of their assigned scores and why they prioritised some dimensions over others, we identified themes for each dimension for the three workplace outcomes (see Results). For the attractiveness of PI during recruitment and selection, we present a summary of the themes, sub-themes and emergent codes (where applicable) in the Results. For the assessment of PI during recruitment, our thematic analysis revealed which aspects of PI are assessed, their associated assessment criteria and the use of traditional and AI-driven methods (see Results). We manually computed inter-coder reliability for the two recruitment-related thematic analyses, one achieving 78% and the other 88%, above the accepted threshold of 70% in the social sciences (see Coleman, Ragan, and Dari 2024). We thematically analysed additional comments offered on the importance of PI during recruitment using the same inductive approach as before.

Results

Participants were closely involved with graduates in different ways. Fifty-two percent recruited and selected graduates, 50% contributed to their learning and development, 69% engaged in

day-to-day supervision, and 46% in performance management. Eight percent were involved for less than two years, 45% between two and five years, 23% six to 10 years, and 24% more than 10 years.

Meaning and importance of PI

Table 2 presents the importance ratings for the four dimensions. Overall, *familiarity* reported the highest average score (4.15) of the four dimensions with appropriate behaviour/code of conduct recording the highest mean of the five constituent items. *Professional self-efficacy* followed (3.87) with similar scores across its four items. *Proximity* recorded an average of 3.86 and greater variation among its seven items. The lowest was having strong ties with the profession (3.47) and the highest motivation to succeed in the profession and sharing the profession's values, both 4.12. *Experience* had the lowest average (3.40) and greatest range among constituent items, the lowest being

Table 2. Importance of different dimensions of professional identity.

Dimension	Not important (%)	Slightly important (%)	Moderately important (%)	Important (%)	Extremely important (%)	Mean	SD
Familiarity (α=.80)						**4.15**	**.59**
Beliefs/values important to those working in profession	0.6	5.0	15.0	53.7	25.7	3.99	.81
Typical working practices/conditions	1.2	2.9	15.0	48.4	32.4	4.08	.83
Appropriate behaviour/code of conduct	0.3	1.8	11.2	36.9	49.9	4.34	.77
Expected standards of performance	0.0	4.1	13.0	43.1	39.8	4.19	.81
Typical tasks/responsibilities	0.3	2.7	13.3	51.3	32.4	4.13	.76
Proximity (α=.86)						**3.86**	**.67**
Strong ties with members of profession	6.5	11.5	24.8	43.1	14.2	3.47	1.08
Identifies positively with members of profession	1.5	5.6	21.2	46.6	25.1	3.88	.90
Membership of profession important to them	1.5	10.6	23.6	45.4	18.9	3.70	.95
Shares characteristics with other members of profession	1.2	8.8	26.8	44.5	18.6	3.71	.91
Motivated to succeed in profession	0.9	4.1	14.5	43.4	37.2	4.12	.87
Shares values of profession	0.3	4.4	13.6	46.9	34.8	4.12	.82
Satisfaction with working practices/conditions of profession	0.6	3.8	16.8	50.7	28.0	4.02	.81
Experience (α=.86)						**3.40**	**.92**
Studied in a discipline related to profession	1.2	6.5	18.3	47.8	26.3	3.91	.90
Has some prior work experience related to profession	5.3	16.2	25.1	35.1	18.3	3.45	1.12
Part of an interest group related to profession	10.3	15.3	26.0	32.7	15.6	3.28	1.20
Follows developments in the profession via different media	8.3	14.7	23.9	37.2	15.9	3.38	1.16
Knows personally some people who work in profession	20.9	12.4	19.8	31.6	15.3	3.08	1.38
Has interacted with professionals in industry	10.0	14.7	23.9	36.0	15.3	3.32	1.19
Professional self-efficacy (α=.84)						**3.87**	**.74**
Feels prepared for entering/working in profession	0.9	6.2	20.1	51.3	21.5	3.86	.85
Is confident that they can do an excellent job at work	0.6	5.9	21.8	44.2	27.4	3.92	.88
No doubts they can master the skills necessary to succeed in work	1.8	9.1	21.5	43.7	23.9	3.79	.97
Understands the kind of challenges faced by profession/industry	1.8	5.9	18.6	46.6	27.1	3.91	.92

knowing people who work in the profession (3.08) and the highest studying in a related discipline (3.91). Interestingly, related work experience scored among the lowest of the 22 items.

Inter-dimension bivariate correlations in Table 3 show strong, positive correlations ($p < .01$), other than for experience and familiarity, which are of lesser magnitude. This means an increase in one dimension's importance was associated with increases in others.

Variations in the importance of PI

Table 4 summarises the linear regression models on the importance of each dimension. *SE* indicates standard error and β the standardised regression coefficient (expected change in importance for each independent variable, holding other predictors constant). Using Cohen (1988), we considered effect sizes below 0.29 as small, 0.3–0.49 moderate, and large as greater than 0.5. We disregarded multicollinearity as inflated standard errors were absent and the variance inflation factor ranged from 1 to 5 (Allen, Bennett, and Heritage 2014). We did not detect autocorrelation when error terms are correlated, as the Durbin-Watson tests approximated to two (Norusis 2008). We used the predictor variables' final group (e.g. 55 + years) as the base category for dummy variables.

Neither the *familiarity* nor *proximity* models were significant with only small-to-moderate negative associations showing younger employers assigned less importance compared to the oldest age group. The *professional self-efficacy* model was also not significant and reported small-to-moderate positive associations for micro- and medium businesses, indicating they assigned greater importance than large organisations, and 25–34-year-olds placing less emphasis on this dimension than the oldest group.

In contrast, the *experience* model was significant and reported several large, significant associations for industry and organisation size. Respondents in hospitality, education and professional services groups assigned greater importance to experience than logistics, and those from micro, small and medium organisations compared to large. To explore these differences, we examined item-level means and standard deviations (see Table 5). Overall, we noted less variation for discipline-related study, work experience, interest group membership and interaction with profession members. There were consistently lower ratings from the logistics and large organisation groups, except for discipline-related study, which was valued by larger businesses. In contrast, the healthcare and micro – groups tended towards higher ratings for all but discipline-related studies. We found significant mean differences ($\alpha = .05$) only for the following professions via media $F(6,332) = 3.356$, $p = .003$, and personally knowing people in the profession, $F(6,332) = 2.269$, $p = .037$, with significantly lower importance ratings for healthcare.

Importance of PI for workplace outcomes – rating data

Table 6 presents the average scores (of 100) for the dimensions' relative importance for graduates' workplace learning, performance and wellbeing. *Professional self-efficacy* scored the highest average across dimensions, each exceeding 30. Next was *familiarity* with averages approximating to 27, followed by *experience* with averages around 23, and finally *proximity* with approximate averages of 18.

Table 3. Correlations between professional identity dimensions (n = 339).

	Familiarity	Proximity	Experience	Professional self-efficacy
Familiarity	1	.630***	.266***	.583***
Proximity	.630***	1	.637***	.753***
Experience	.266***	.637***	1	.590***
Professional self-efficacy	.583***	.753***	.590***	1

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$.

Table 4. Linear regression on the importance of professional identity dimensions.

	Familiarity			Proximity			Experience			Professional self-efficacy		
Variable	*B*	SE	*β*	*B*	SE	*β*	*B*	SE	*β*	*B*	SE	*β*
Constant	4.07	0.23		3.89	0.26		2.72	0.33		3.66	0.28	
Female	0.12	0.07	0.10	0.04	0.08	0.03	−0.10	0.11	−0.05	−0.04	0.09	−0.03
15–24 years	−0.44	0.19	−0.16**	−0.14	0.21	−0.05	0.23	0.27	0.05	−0.27	0.23	−0.08
25–34 years	−0.31	0.11	−0.24***	−0.17	0.13	−0.12	0.23	0.16	0.11	−0.24	0.14	−0.15*
35–44 years	−0.16	0.11	-0.12	−0.08	0.13	−0.05	0.20	0.17	0.10	−0.12	0.14	−0.07
45–54 years	−0.27	0.12	−0.18**	−0.26	0.14	−0.15*	−0.02	0.17	−0.01	−0.14	0.15	−0.08
Years experience	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.00	0.05
Hospitality/retail	0.12	0.14	0.06	0.11	0.16	0.05	0.64	0.20	0.22***	0.19	0.17	0.08
Finance/insurance/administration	0.11	0.15	0.05	−0.04	0.17	−0.02	0.32	0.21	0.10	0.17	0.18	0.07
Primary/manufacturing/mining/utilities/construction	0.10	0.13	0.06	−0.01	0.15	−0.01	0.27	0.19	0.10	0.09	0.16	0.04
Education/training	0.16	0.14	0.08	0.24	0.16	0.11	0.56	0.21	0.19***	0.24	0.18	0.10
Healthcare	0.01	0.13	0.01	−0.04	0.14	−0.03	0.24	0.18	0.11	0.13	0.16	0.07
Professional/scientific/technical services	0.05	0.12	0.03	0.10	0.14	0.06	0.37	0.18	0.16**	0.09	0.15	0.05
Public sector	0.08	0.17	0.05	−0.17	0.19	−0.10	-0.11	0.24	−0.05	0.07	0.20	0.04
Private sector	0.05	0.15	0.04	−0.08	0.17	−0.05	0.08	0.22	0.04	0.19	0.19	0.12
Micro	0.10	0.17	0.04	0.26	0.19	0.09	0.79	0.24	0.21***	0.43	0.21	0.14**
Small	−0.06	0.11	-0.04	0.02	0.13	0.01	0.40	0.16	0.16**	0.09	0.14	0.04
Medium	−0.01	0.09	-0.01	0.15	0.10	0.11	0.50	0.12	0.27***	0.23	0.11	0.15**
F-value	1.067			1.027			3.159***			1.182		
R^2	.059			.057			.156			.065		
Adjusted R^2	.004			.001			.106			.010		
Durbin-Watson	1.889			2.031			2.259			2.042		

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$.

Table 5. Importance of experience dimension by industry and organisation size.

	Studied related discipline		Work experience		Interest group member		Follows media		Knows professionals personally		Interaction with professionals	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Hospitality/retail	4.00	.76	3.89	1.06	3.67	1.04	3.72	1.09	3.58	1.20	3.75	1.08
Finance/insurance/administration	3.74	1.14	3.32	1.12	3.41	1.05	3.65	1.07	3.44	1.28	3.35	.92
Primary/manufacturing/mining/utilities/construction	3.94	.76	3.52	1.11	3.35	1.12	3.42	1.03	3.15	1.15	3.40	1.00
Education/training	4.03	.71	3.49	1.00	3.51	1.23	3.77	1.06	3.18	1.36	3.49	1.05
Healthcare	3.99	.98	3.42	1.04	3.01	1.28	3.01	1.14	2.74	1.45	3.19	1.35
Professional/scientific/technical services	4.00	.92	3.45	1.20	3.28	1.29	3.38	1.27	3.05	1.48	3.31	1.29
Logistics/wholesale/transport/safety	3.65	.91	3.15	1.24	3.02	1.16	3.08	1.18	2.83	1.40	2.96	1.29
Micro	3.85	.93	3.95	.89	4.00	1.03	3.75	.72	3.70	.98	3.55	1.05
Small	3.94	1.00	3.54	1.16	3.43	1.02	3.52	1.16	3.28	1.27	3.28	1.17
Medium	3.93	.79	3.56	1.05	3.42	1.17	3.57	1.13	3.35	1.34	3.58	1.15
Large	3.89	.99	3.15	1.18	2.88	1.25	2.97	1.78	2.49	1.36	2.93	1.20
Total	3.91	.90	3.45	1.12	3.28	1.20	3.38	1.16	3.08	1.38	3.32	1.19

Table 6. Relative importance of dimensions for learning, performance and wellbeing.

	Learning (n = 335)		Performance (n = 332)		Wellbeing (n = 331)	
Dimension	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Familiarity	26.90	15.52	27.33	18.11	27.24	19.26
Proximity	18.10	10.81	17.86	11.84	18.72	12.23
Experience	23.57	13.84	23.15	15.33	21.90	14.95
Professional self-efficacy	31.44	18.93	31.66	20.54	32.13	23.42

Importance of PI for workplace outcomes – qualitative data

Themes in respondents' explanations for each dimension's constant-sum scores are presented in Table 7. Responses showed many prioritised *professional self-efficacy* given its' criticality for effective learning and performance and something which could not be taught. One stated, 'We can train for skills but need to recruit for attitude. Self-efficacy is an area I would like to see in recruitment as it is a key indicator of likely success' (43). Another explained, 'Professional self-efficacy can't be taught, whereas the others can develop with mentorship and, as such, are less important to begin with' (169). Many emphasised how confidence helped graduates to learn quickly, experiment to solve their problems and become autonomous, helping them 'to take on the challenges of the job, think strategically and be prepared to learn from experienced professionals' (157). Having self-belief in their capabilities supported adaptability, skill application and encouraged them to set high standards and be accountable. Many tied wellbeing to self-reflection and how graduates perceived they were progressing. Professional self-efficacy assured graduates of their own competence, making them less dependent on others and supporting 'effective action-plans, handling difficulties, managing emotions, stress, and anxiety, and exercising control' (12). Another felt it influenced 'how much an employee is willing to ask for help or seek support when they are feeling overwhelmed' (169).

Many linked *familiarity* with workplace learning, 'they know what to expect and they learn and grow from there' (120) and 'The sooner they are familiar with the realities of the profession, the more they will have an interest, enthusiasm and willingness to learn' (102). Some felt familiarity

Table 7. Relative importance of PI dimensions for workplace learning, performance and well-being.

Dimension	Learning	Performance	Well-being
Familiarity	Understands required skills and performance levels	More efficient as integrates more quickly into the workplace	Enhances sense of belonging
	Motivation to perform to known professional standards	Motivated to perform well	Heightens feelings of achievement
Proximity	Knowledge from professional contacts	Guidance from professional contacts	Emotional support from professional contacts
			Strong sense of social belonging
Experience	Learns quickly	Builds confidence for better workplace integration	Enhances sense of belonging
		Can work more independently	
		Better prepared for tasks and responsibilities	
		May encounter differences with pre-conceived notions of roles, processes and standards	
Professional self-efficacy	Manifests a positive, can-do attitude that cannot be taught	Not afraid to experiment to solve problems	Resilient
		Can work more independently	Copes well with challenges
	Engages in self-reflection and monitors progress		Manages emotions effectively
	Learns quickly	Sets high standards and is accountable to them	Seeks support when needed
	Willing to ask for help and learn from others	Confident in applying skills and knowledge	
		Open to change	

aided graduates' motivation to perform to expected standards, while others emphasised how it supported feeling comfortable at work, 'to quickly integrate into their profession' (105), and being more efficient. Some believed it enhanced graduates' sense of belonging and heightened feelings of achievement to elevate emotional security and wellbeing, 'familiarity gives insight into the demands of the job to then establish coping strategies to aid personal wellbeing long-term' (127).

We observed mixed feelings on the importance of *experience* for workplace outcomes. Some believed it incited confidence, helping graduates to fit in, learn quickly in their role and work independently, improving success and wellbeing. Others recognised how it prepared graduates for tasks and responsibilities, improving workplace performance. However, many argued prior experience was unnecessary and often brings challenges, 'Experience can hinder progression as they have established perceptions of roles, processes and expectations, which usually leads to conflict and performance issues' (57). Some preferred graduates without experience, 'because it allows us to shape them to best suit our needs' (124) and 'some knowledge of the incoming profession is useful, but I prefer to mould and lead new employees by my example' (117).

For *proximity*, some recognised the value of professional networks for knowledge sharing, capability development, understanding industry trends, and capacity building as they learn 'how to engage with other professionals' (59). One explained its link with wellbeing, 'Having supportive professional relationships provides guidance, encouragement, and social belonging' (21). However, some felt graduates may not yet understand their own values, 'while values are important for fostering workplace harmony and ethical decision-making, early-career graduates may be still in the process of defining their values in relation to their profession' (37). Others placed greater value on other dimensions, 'We don't need graduates who have connections or prior knowledge of the profession. We need graduates who are willing to learn, eager to give things a try, capable of completing tasks and want to make the profession their long-term career (90).

Resonating with the reported positive correlations, responses highlighted the interrelated and dynamic nature of the four dimensions, sometimes influenced by context (e.g. role/industry/workplace demands) and each bringing something different to the workplace. For example, 'The four dimensions are all important. Knowledge and skills drive immediate performance, values build trust, relationships foster growth, and self-concept supports confidence and resilience' (91). Another stated, 'values and beliefs are crucial for workplace performance as they shape ethics, commitment, confidence, and adaptability. Motives drive engagement and effort, while experiences enhance practical capability but can be offset by strong learning attitudes' (200). Similarly, 'Understanding the profession's values, expectations, and norms is essential for workplace integration. However, theoretical knowledge alone does not guarantee success without practical exposure' (21).

Respondents also emphasised how dimensions' influence shifted over time, 'Experience and familiarity will be an advantage in the beginning when learning on the job; however, professional self-efficacy is more important in the long-term to aid learning more challenging skills and complex knowledge' (169). Some also commented how expecting proximity, experience and familiarity in new graduates is unfair, 'Not everyone is privileged enough to be exposed to their profession of choice before they start in it' (300).

PI and recruitment

Attractiveness of PI during recruitment

Table 8 presents the themes, sub-themes and codes for why PI is attractive to graduate recruiters. The first of the four themes, *person-organisation fit*, was raised by many employers. It refers to PI signalling a candidate shares the values and goals of the organisation (or industry/profession), assuring cultural fit. For example, 'it signals critical attributes that align with organisational goals and reduce hiring risks' (218) and 'it demonstrates a candidate's values and alignment with the organisation's culture, making them a strong fit for the role' (118). This was important for seamless integration into the workplace and improving retention. The second theme was *commitment to the profession*

Table 8. Thematic analysis for attractiveness of PI to graduate recruiters.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Person-organisation fit		Values alignment
		Shared goals
Commitment to profession		Motivation to succeed in profession
		Passion/interest in profession
Professional maturity	Career clarity	Clear career goals and purpose
		Understanding of career pathways
		Self-awareness
	Personal responsibility	Accountability
		Self-discipline
		Ethical conduct
	Self-confidence	Confidence in technical know-how
		Perceived competence in soft skills
Capacity for success		Enthusiasm for learning
		Willingness to engage in professional development
		Stands out from others

whereby PI signalled 'intrinsic drive and self-motivation to pursue the profession and achieve the goals they set themselves' (19). Respondents felt that demonstrating passion, interest and an eagerness to excel assured they would seek to contribute to profession and helped to safeguard against early departures.

The third theme, *professional maturity*, was multifaceted with three sub-themes, each contributing to a strong sense-of-professional self. The first was career clarity, where graduates show 'a clear sense of purpose and direction' (179) and 'understanding of their career' (126). The second was demonstrating personal responsibility; their self-discipline, ethical practice and ownership of their work making them an asset to teams and the wider organisation. Finally, self-confidence in their knowledge and capabilities indicated readiness to join and thrive in the work environment. The fourth and final theme was *capacity for success,* which related to graduates demonstrating an eagerness to learn and continuously develop at work, and as a broader indicator signalling 'someone's ability to succeed in their role and create a career in that industry' (300), helping them to stand out from others.

Assessment of PI during recruitment

Table 9 presents the thematic analysis on how PI is assessed during recruitment and selection. We identified seven aspects of PI as being assessed, each with its own assessment criteria and use of traditional/AI-driven methods. We observed mixed responses on employing AI-tools with a tendency for greater usage in early recruitment stages and traditional methods for late-stage, smaller candidate pools. One illuminated AI-tools' value across stages, 'AI-tools detect inconsistencies between self-identity and actions, so graduates must align their online presence, resumes, and interview responses' (215). A small number advocated how traditional methods can help unravel disconnections between staged and authentic identities as 'AI-driven tools have made it easier to pretend to be someone you are not' (20) and to help understand 'the vibe of the person' (166). One used only traditional methods to not miss any good candidates, 'Given significant workforce shortage, we interview every applicant with the relevant qualifications' (43).

Only a small proportion of respondents added comments on the importance placed on PI during graduate recruitment. Some reinforced PI's criticality for organisation and job fit. For example, 'it leads us to the right candidate' (74) and 'I want to make sure it's a job they want; I don't want to employ someone that stays for only a week' (258). Others emphasised its value for assuring ethical practice and appropriate conduct, particularly in regulatory environments. Some advocates stated, 'while PI might not be a formal assessment criterion, it's a powerful underlying factor that influences recruiters' decisions. It provides valuable insights into a graduate's potential, cultural fit, and long-term value to the company' (77). Another explained, PI 'transforms them from generic applicants into memorable,

Table 9. How PI is assessed during graduate recruitment.

Aspect of PI	Assessment criteria	Traditional methods	AI-driven methods
Qualification/ registrations	Suitability of degree qualification Achievement of professional registrations	Manual scanning of resumes/ applications	ChatGPT/machine learning/ predictive analytics for scanning resumes/applications
Previous experience	Work experience Life experience Industry engagement	Interviews Reference checks Work samples	Scanning online profiles/ resumes/cover letters.
Professional knowledge	Knowledge of industry Technological proficiency Achieving efficiencies with AI tools	Aptitude tests Situational/problem-solving questions/simulations applying discipline knowledge Questions to verify understanding of topics	
Commitment to profession	Articulating desire to pursue profession	Questions to gauge research on organisation/industry Preparation of own questions Informal conversation	Scanning application documents for keywords/industry-related terms aligned with job description
Professionalism	Body language/tone/ appearance/mannerisms attitudes and self-presentation	Informal conversation	Analysis of language patterns/ social media presence/facial expressions, and question responses.
Values alignment	Identification of values and alignment with professional practice	Personality/psychometric assessments Behavioural questions Assessment centres Informal conversation	Analysis of resumes Video interview software to assess verbal/non-verbal cues for desired traits
Expectations, motivations and goals	Desired career/role in five years What seeking from the role Expectations about future development	Interview questions Informal conversation	

purpose-driven candidates. Conversely, a vague or inconsistent identity can lead to rejection, even with strong grades or internships' (218). A few, however, considered it desirable, not essential. For example, 'they will be trained and developed once they start working' (208) and 'It's hard to have a strong PI when you have never worked in the profession' (58).

Using PI to predict workplace outcomes

Table 10 presents the percentages and means for how helpful respondents perceived a graduate applicant's PI is for predicting six workplace outcomes. Employers considered PI most helpful for predicting organisational fit with almost three-quarters finding it very or extremely helpful, closely followed by professional growth and development, wellbeing, and productivity, which two-thirds of respondents felt were very or extremely helpful. We observed marginally lower averages for predicting graduates' ability for professional socialisation and capacity for leadership (between the somewhat/very helpful markers).

Discussion

Importance and meaning of PI

When considering PI's dimensions, employers' emphasis on graduates' understanding of roles and responsibilities, appropriate behaviour and expected standards of performance (*familiarity*) reinforces the prominence of professional socialisation in conceptualisations of PI (Clarke, Hyde, and Drennan 2012; Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012). Employers broadly agreed that *familiarity* helped graduates grasp meaning in their work, identify with professional practice and feel comfortable in the work

Table 10. Professional identity predicting graduate performance (n = 328).

	Not at all helpful (%)	Slightly helpful (%)	Somewhat helpful (%)	Very helpful (%)	Extremely helpful (%)	Mean	SD
Ability to socialize into professional values and behaviours	0.3	10.7	25.3	47.9	15.9	3.68	.88
Fit with organisational culture	0.0	6.7	21.0	42.4	29.9	3.95	.88
Capacity for leadership	1.8	8.8	30.5	38.7	20.1	3.66	.96
Workplace productivity and performance	1.8	6.7	22.9	47.6	21.0	3.79	.91
Propensity for professional growth and development	0.9	5.2	22.9	51.8	19.2	3.83	.83
Workplace wellbeing	1.5	4.3	26.8	46.0	21.3	3.81	.87

setting (Toubassi et al. 2023). Also illuminated was graduates' understanding of and connection with the profession's beliefs and values, an aspect of *proximity*, resonating with studies connecting PI with cultural fit (e.g. Tomlinson and Anderson 2021) and congruence between personal and professional self in identity formation (Ibarra 1999). We found similarity in the perceived importance of *familiarity* and *proximity* across industries and sectors unexpected, warranting further investigation.

We were also surprised by the lack of emphasis on *experience*, contravening its purported importance in graduate recruitment (Jackson, Riebe, and Macau 2022; McCracken, Currie, and Harrison 2016). Perspectives may be shaped by the perceived strength of ties from different types of professional engagement. Employers considered personally knowing/interacting with members of the profession as less important, the lesser acculturating value for graduates sending only superficial signals of immersion in the profession. In contrast, respondents across diverse sectors and organisation valued relevant study, supporting technical expertise as part of PI (Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017). Some industries placed greater value on discipline-related study (e.g. hospitality/education), perhaps to leverage highly valued practical skills training (e.g. internships/practicums) in relevant tertiary qualifications, while others encouraged applications from different disciplines, possibly to diversify the workforce for innovative practice (Chaudhry, Paquibut, and Tunio 2021). Concerns that incoming graduates with extensive life/work experience (and consequently networks) are less malleable to organisational culture (Hora 2020) and identity is more pliable in early career (Ibarra 1999) perhaps suggest that graduates should focus on experience that brings strong proximal value to workplaces.

Employers' emphasis on *professional self-efficacy* aligns with graduates' PI being characterised by belief in their preparedness and worth for entering the profession (Holmes 2013). Not only was *professional self-efficacy* perceived as a dominating PI dimension, aligning with earlier theorists (e.g. Holmes 2013; Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt 2017), respondents strongly communicated its association with drive, independence, excellence, and accountability in graduates, supporting strong workplace performance and longer-term career success (Petruzziello et al. 2023). Echoing earlier employer-based studies, it aids the ability to cope with challenges, enhancing resilience and wellbeing (e.g. Ventura, Salanova, and Llorens 2015). As something which cannot be overtly developed at work, it was prioritised during graduate recruitment and should be supported by HE through activities that build confidence through practice. Small businesses' greater emphasis on this dimension highlights their need for confident, work-ready and resilient graduates who can contribute quickly to core operations. Larger organisations scored *experience* and *professional self-efficacy* (other than discipline-related study) as less important, possibly reflecting relatively more resources and infrastructure for training to address gaps in graduates' professional knowledge and capabilities, better enabling them to absorb graduates without prior exposure to the profession.

PI and recruitment

Overall, findings suggest that PI comes from within, rather than who the graduate knows or how engaged they are with the profession. It is their profound, personal connection with the

profession, the intrinsic value it brings them and that sense of being a worthy professional, that characterise a well-formed PI. Cultural fit and salient forms of cultural and social capital appear to underpin the dimensions of PI recognised by employers. Graduates who can signal this in ways that align with a workplace's values and behavioural expectations, indicating that they are becoming appropriately acculturated, are likely to have their emerging PIs affirmed in the recruitment process.

Accordingly, exploration of PI's role in recruitment highlighted how it signalled, albeit subtly at times, four important markers of employment potential. Foremost, it signals graduates' person-organisation fit, a dominant recruitment criterion (Jackson, Riebe, and Macau 2022; McCracken, Currie, and Harrison 2016; Tomlinson and Anderson 2021) and fundamental to incoming staff's career success and creating a cohesive workforce with limited turnover (see Boon and Biron 2016). Also important for retention was PI's signalling of commitment to the profession. Curiosity and a critical approach to learning augments PI formation and graduates progressing to reflective practitioners who question and advance practice (Trede and McEwen 2012). PI's signalling of professional maturity indicates who they are and seek to be professionally, aiding graduates' reconciliation of multiple selves (e.g. professional/social/family), a process needing further investigation (Trede, Macklin, and Bridges 2012) and helps differentiate graduates as potential high performers in crowded labour markets.

The use and value of AI-driven tools were mixed. Some preferred traditional approaches that allow for personal judgement on what McCracken, Currie, and Harrison (2016) termed 'the edge' in graduate recruits. Although some questioned the accuracy of AI for identifying suitable candidates, respondents did not raise documented concerns with AI perpetuating inequalities and discriminating in recruitment processes (Köchling and Wehner 2020). It was valued for processing high volumes of applications, increasing efficiency (Basch, Melchers, and Buttner 2022) and assessing consistency in candidates' professional profiles across recruitment stages.

Implications for educators

Our findings have significant implications for HE practices and support earlier advocates for explicitly and intentionally developing PI through reflective practice and authentic learning (Dempsey, Healy, and Linehan 2024; Jackson, 2017). Curriculum-based approaches should scaffold opportunities to engage with authentic practice through degree programs, building students' exposure to industry over time. Early experiential activities, such as virtual work experience simulations, allow students to connect with industry asynchronously and experiment (and possibly fail) in a low-pressure environment. Progression to on-campus work-integrated learning (WIL) activities (e.g. projects or consultancy with industry partners) then more intensive work-based WIL (e.g. practicum, internships) can systematically build students' professional awareness, confidence, and capability, including those with less mature social and cultural capital. Critical to students developing an intrinsic connection with the profession (or not) is HE complementing authentic learning with reflective and sense-making practices. This strongly resonates with career development learning models (e.g. National Career Institute 2022) and, as asserted by respondents, cannot be explicitly taught in the workplace. Early learning activities and assessments should encourage students to 'look within' to understand what motivates them, their values and how they might align with different work cultures, building confidence in person-organisation fit. Recognising that students often do not see the value in reflection, and struggle to reflect effectively, educators must guide and support them in using different models and approaches, particularly undergraduates who often prioritise factual knowledge over critical self-reflection (see Lim, Hoe, and Zheng 2022).

Specifically for *familiarity*, tasks and/or assessments where students interpret and apply aspects of organisational/industry codes of conduct can aid socialisation into professional norms and practices. Encouraging industry partners to expose students to different work areas will improve understanding of 'the bigger picture' and diverse roles, responsibilities and career pathways in the profession.

Involving partners in students' visualisation of prioritised skills, and expected performance levels, through guest lectures or videos may demystify often-ambiguous professional skills and reinforce their importance in different industries/occupations. Capability assessments (self, peer and/or industry partner), video pitches, LinkedIn profiles, and e-portfolios can encourage students to reflect on, synthesise, and articulate their development and demonstration of these skills in different settings.

Developing *proximity* requires students to engage deeply with industry partners to establish meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging. Rather than simply engaging students in networking activities to connect them with a high volume of professional contacts, educators must scaffold activities (and assessments) that foster rich insights into the realities of professions. Initially building connections through communities of practice (Jackson, 2017; Toubassi et al. 2023) and culminating in internships, which offer profound immersion into working life could support identity formation.

HE curriculum should provide a safe learning environment for students to 'practice being a professional', failing if necessary, and to reflect on their experiences to support *professional self-efficacy*. Honest, constructive feedback on students' work-related capabilities is critical to developing industry-standard graduates. Industry partners providing verbal feedback on their WIL students' PI as a recorded/transcribed dialogue allows students to reflect on their capabilities, gaps and developmental goals without burdening time-poor partners. Curriculum design that develops resilience is also critical. For example, requiring students to source their own work-based WIL opportunities means exposing them to cultural cohesion when liaising with potential partners, as well as learning to cope with rejection during selection processes. This, however, must be predicated on curriculum-based support for developing recruitment documentation which reflects students' true (and credible) professional self, and prepares them for partner interviews.

Conclusion

We examined employers' understanding of PI and how it is operationalised in graduate recruitment. Our findings highlight how a well-formed PI can mean graduates have a deep, authentic understanding of work practices, standards and expected behaviours, and share the values of their profession and/or industry. In addition to professional socialisation, employers associated PI with technical knowledge and skills from relevant degrees, and graduates feeling prepared, confident and resilient in their transition to work. PI was more about graduates' commitment and cultural connection to the profession, rather than who they know (networks) and how much experience they have (prior work). This is a 'time-served' difference and resonates with Jackson's (2016) distinction between established workers' PI and students/graduates as aspirational professionals with pre-professional identity. Through both AI-driven and traditional methods, PI plays a subtle yet significant role in helping recruiters decipher graduates' suitability through its signalling of professional commitment, career clarity and ownership, confidence, and cultural fit.

Our research supports calls for HE to purposively develop PI (e.g. Tomlinson and Jackson 2021) and clearly communicate to students its value for self-development, securing roles of optimal fit and realising their labour market worth. While signals during recruitment may only be loosely related to applicants' performance potential (Tomlinson and Anderson 2021), we revealed how aspects of PI might be tangibly assessed, informing recruitment strategies that aid talent retention amid high levels of graduate turnover (Donald 2023). We acknowledge our study's limitations, which include it being cross-sectional, reliant on self-report data, located in one country, and confined to a survey (albeit with closed and open responses), which precludes deep, qualitative inquiry. However, we provide rich insights from an important yet overlooked stakeholder that has important implications for future educational practice. Our work predicates future research. We explored the viewpoints of employers in business/commerce roles, and who may therefore engage more with graduates of commerce-related disciplines, and future studies could examine the perceived importance of PI, and how it features in recruitment, in different occupations and industries. This would

inform career provision in HE and enhance our understanding of nuances among roles associated with both professionally oriented and more generalist degrees. A further area is the use of AI for assessing traits cognisant of a formed PI during graduate recruitment, including if and how candidates can be coached in demonstrating these, and whether this disadvantages those without access to such guidance.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics approval details

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