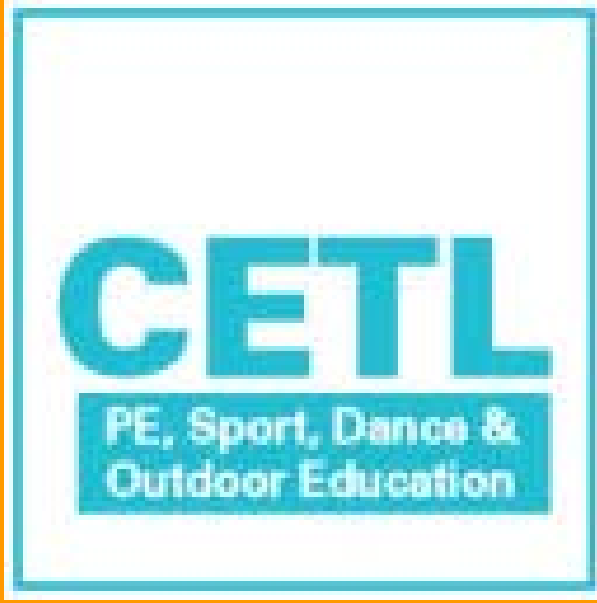


# Researching Graduate Employability in Outdoor and Environmental Education

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## 1. Background

The Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Professional Learning at Liverpool John Moores University addresses the themes of employability, leadership and enterprise within the curriculum.

Dearing (1997) emphasised the importance of links between the world of work and education and included several references to enhancing students' skills in his recommendations. McNair (2003) concludes that successful graduates will require greater ownership of their employability skills in order to make the most of career opportunities during a lifetime in a rapidly changing world. Maher (2004 p 7) states that "Despite clear consensus in government and HE about the importance of graduate employability, there appears to be a lack of clarity about what specific skills or attributes are required for successful employment". In a survey based on Yorke and Knight's (2004) list of graduate 'attributes', Maher's former Hospitality students ranked 'self-confidence', 'prioritising' and 'adaptability' at the top of attributes for career success. Peart (2007 p 32) reports complaints within the outdoor industry that: "graduates from outdoor degrees have not been properly prepared for working in an outdoor centre or company". Stott (2007) examined students' attainment of National Governing Body Awards in Outdoor Education over 5 years, with the assumption that these professional qualifications, as well as a good degree, are sought by employers. This project investigated the 'employability' of our graduates, supplementing knowledge gained through existing WBL contacts.

## 2. Aims

This project aims were:

- To conduct an on-line survey of outdoor education employers
- To interview a further sample of relevant employers
- To provide material to further understanding of what employers require from graduates
- To stimulate future investigation and discussion

## 3. Methods and initial findings

An on-line survey provided information from 18 employers linked to outdoor and environmental education. Results indicate that the top three skills required are: *good verbal communication, team-working/interpersonal skills, personal planning and organising/initiative*; the three main areas of experience/qualification most valued are: *work experience, National Governing Body Awards in Outdoor Pursuits and a driving licence*. 20% of those surveyed were very content with the knowledge, skills and capabilities displayed by graduates, but 80% were just fairly content or not content. Material from semi-structured interviews with four representative employers (using prompts from the above results to stimulate discussion) was analysed using concepts from an adapted version (Cole 1994) of the Chenail Qualitative Matrix. Initial results confirm the opinions of the original on-line survey group and also reveal that: *passion for the outdoors and the environment, plenty of valid work experience and ability to work under pressure were essential*.

## 4. Tables 1-3 and Figs. 1-2 show results of initial on-line survey of graduate employers in the outdoor industry including schools, Outdoor Education Centres, Adventure Tourism and Mountain Guiding companies

Table 1: Ranked list of skills as required by employers

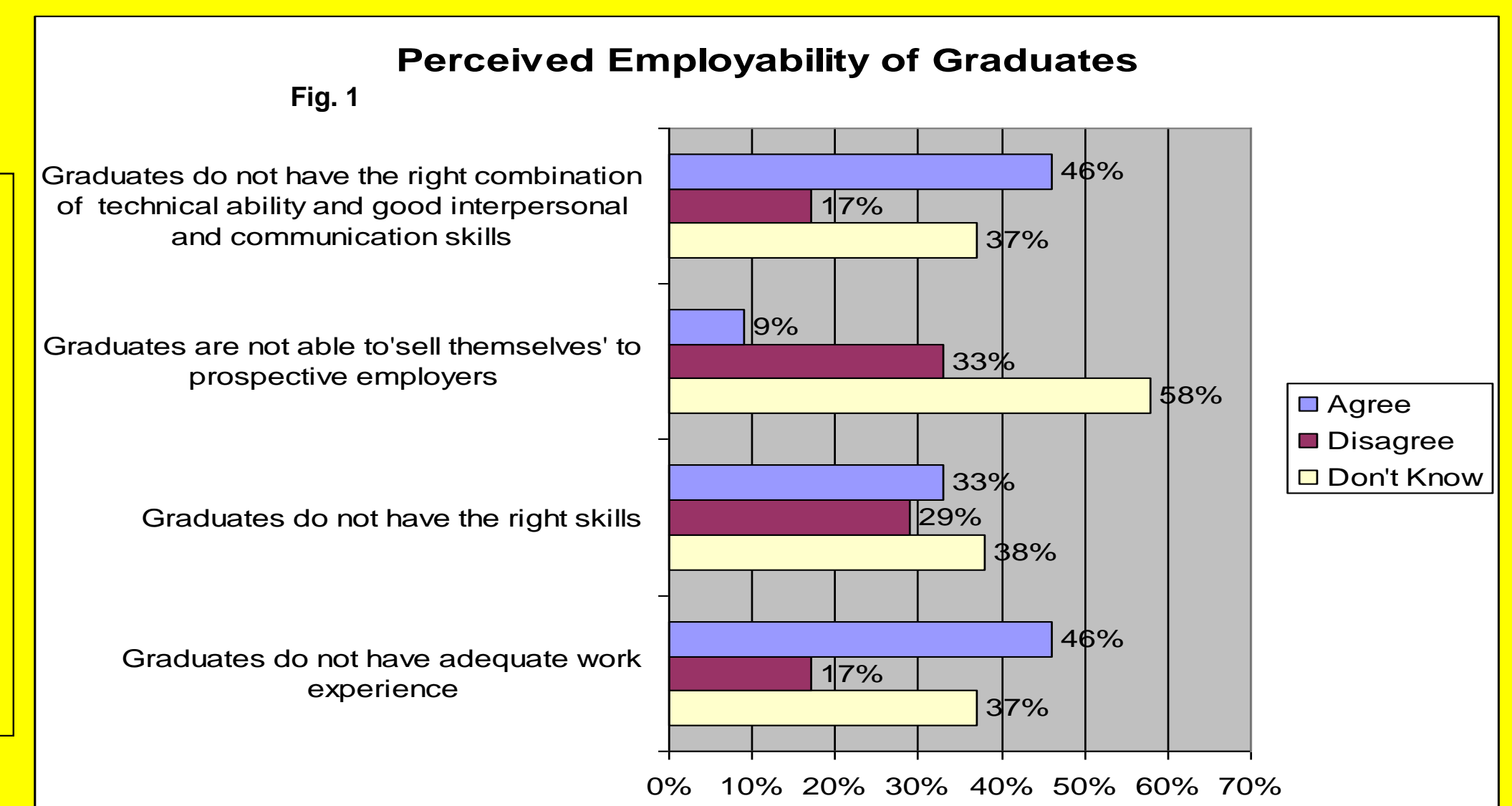
Rank	Skill	Tick your top 5
1	Verbal communication	
2	Team working and interpersonal skills	
Joint 3	Personal planning and organising	
Joint 3	Initiative	
5	Self confidence	
6	Analysing and solving problems	
7	Written communication	
8	ICT	
9	Numerical reasoning	
10	Networking	
11	Company specific skills	
12	Self-promotion	
13	Negotiation	
14	Political awareness	

Table 2: Ranked list of knowledge/ skills/ experience required by employers

Rank	Knowledge/ experience/ skills	Tick your top 4
1	Work Experience	
2	NGBs	
3	Driving licence	
4	Hit the ground running	
5	Market themselves effectively	
6	A good degree	

Table 3: Ranked list of importance of relevant Governing Body Awards required by employers

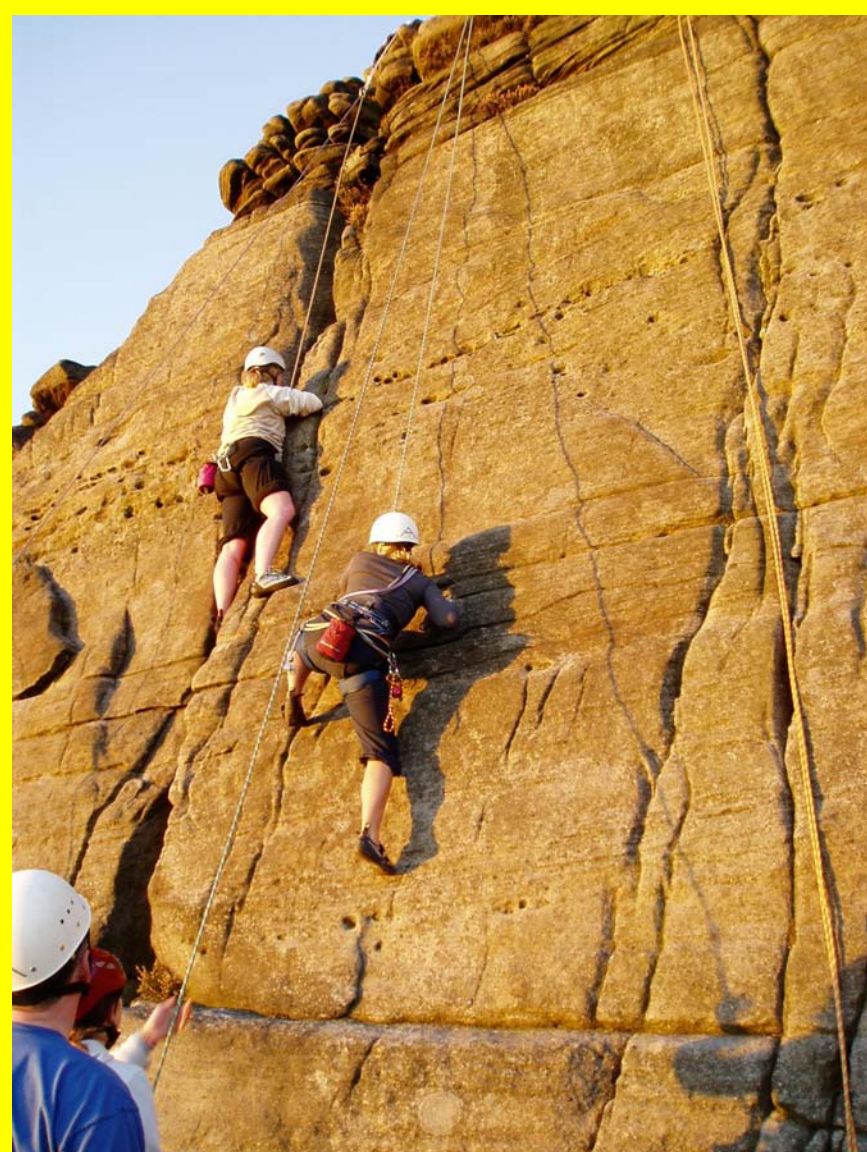
Rank	Award	Rank your top 4
1	Rescue and Emergency Care L2	
2	Single Pitch Award	
3	Mountain Leader Award (Summer)	
4 =	Mountain Instructor Award (MIA)	
4 =	Mountain Instructor Certificate (MIC)	
4 =	BCU Inland Kayak Coach L2	
7	BCU Open Canoe Coach L2	
8	Local Cave Leader L1	



## Table 4: Summary of main themes emerging from employer interviews

Table 1- 3 & Figure 1 above were used to stimulate comment from the four employers interviewed. FOUR main themes emerged:

Theme	Passion and Involvement	Skills, Qualities & Understanding	Qualifications	Experience
<b>Employer</b>				
<b>Outdoor Education Adviser</b>	"I would be looking for passion and enthusiasm for the outdoors as one of the key things." "... as long as they have got that fire in their belly about the outdoors ... in their spare time they want to get outdoors and do stuff ... we think that transmits to the kids really, really well." "... if you have got someone who is a generalist and is more focused on the career and not really into the outdoors themselves you don't quite get that same passion."	"Able to connect quickly with people of all different age groups and quickly set up a positive working relationship with them so they can keep visiting staff on board and also enthuse the young people irrespective of their backgrounds." "I would actually agree with their (previous employer survey) top five of: self-confidence, initiative, planning and organisation, team-working and verbal communication are all vital."	".....in terms of hard skills a degree is really useful. We ask for qualifications at both centres, an FE or HE qualification in environmental education or outdoor education or another sort of related subject." "Essential ones would be ML, a paddle sport up to Level 2 and either SPA, mountain bike or BOF." "... they definitely need to be able to drive and crucially they need a minibus ticket ideally." "People coming out of a three year degree have a good mixture of skills and the three years has been time well spent and it has raised their awareness of what the range of skills needs to be."	"Someone to come to us with a couple of years proper work experience would be able to hit the ground running compared to someone who had done a little bit of practice." A reference from that (outdoor work placement) would be used as the key reference, in that we might get more than we could out of a university tutor reference. We can find out whether they show up at work day in day out, whether they connect with a whole range of people, how did they get on with the educational side, were they able to get that across to their clients as well?"
<b>Head of Outdoor Education: Independent School (7-18)</b>	"... you would need someone with quite a lot of experience and they actually get out there and do these activities."	"Personal skills, dealing with different types of pupils, as they have specific needs and learn in different ways. The ability to get on with people and engage them in certain ways rather than having a certain style that you are going to use all the time." "... being willing and happy to give up free time to go on trips and know what and how to do it." "... I would employ somebody here based on their personality and the way that they are going to interact with our pupils whether they have got a degree or not."	"We need a wide range of qualifications to actually fit the programme that we deliver. We can't just have someone who is qualified to climb because they also need to kayak, canoe, possibly sail and obviously need their Mountain Leader (Award) for the hills. We need quite widely qualified people. We are also looking for people with a little bit of X factor, something different, they might be able to go surfing or scuba diving, maybe a bit of caving, possibly other things that they can offer." "A degree in outdoor education should involve NGBs (National Governing Body Awards e.g. Mountain Leader). There is extra work for the NGBs so this shows that bit of extra dedication."	"Previous work experience, working in other schools, working with children of similar abilities to what we have got at school here." "Work experience, I think should be included in the degree, placements in centres and schools. In more than one place, two sets of work experience in different places throughout the years. That would give you a wider experience and make you more employable."
<b>Head of Local Authority Outdoor Education Centre</b>	"They need to be able to show a depth of experience, show a real care/passion for what it is they do. To show that they give up their own time, been there and done lots of activities. Things like that show that the person has an interest in their career. I expect people to have a genuine interest to be able to do the job well."	"We would want somebody who has got a grounding in outdoor education rather than just someone who has a grounding in adventure or just providing activities. So somebody who has got an understanding of what outdoor education is ..." "... we need people who are very good with working with young people but also arranging young people, they can deal with all the situations that young people can impose on an instructor. Most of our clients are schools, with the age mainly secondary schools. We work with youth at risk, housing associations, and care homes. They are the older people but they also have the associated problems which our staff need to deal with."	".... a minimum of the following national governing body awards: ML, SPA and a Level 2 in canoeing. Here, due to the programmes that we run, we would be looking for people with higher qualifications. Maybe MIA, Level 3 Kayak (Inland and Sea), maybe Mine Leader qualifications and also experience of working in gorges and on the coastline." "I have worked for a college in outdoor education where the students left with no national governing body awards, no training awards. That to me is completely ludicrous."	"I'm not sure that people realise they don't just need the qualifications but the experience to go along with it. People should be aiming to go out there and get as much experience as they can in lots of different areas. That would be a very good way for people to move forward in their career." "If they are doing outdoor education and want to be an instructor/tutor etc. then if you have a degree you need to be going to a centre during your first year so you can start to get a grasp of how these places run. I think that two work experience placements would be better. One of them being quite early on so that they can get a taste. Think also there has to be some voluntary work in there, it's hard to make people do that but just to have 2/3 weeks potential work experience is just not good enough to have coming off a three year degree."
<b>Commercial Outdoor Education Centre Manager</b>	"Someone who is enthusiastic about the job, someone who is really keen about the outdoors themselves. I think that it is important if you are working in the outdoors to be passionate about the sport that you are teaching." "Teamwork and interpersonal skills would be very important for us. Analysing and solving problems is definitely important, in our industry there is no set daily routine, you have to think on your feet."	"Someone who has staying power. I need to know that they are not just going to give in after three weeks. It's a physically and mentally demanding job." "Teamwork and interpersonal skills would be very important for us. Analysing and solving problems is definitely important, in our industry there is no set daily routine, you have to think on your feet."	"In our centre they have to have NGB awards. And also I think a good degree. I think that they are very useful things because they do show that you can stick at something for a period of time." "Mountain Leader Award, Single Pitch Award, First Aid Certificate and out of the ones that are left we don't do any canoeing or coaching as we sub-contract that out. So it's between MIA and Level 1 Cave Leader. Caving would be an important extra skill."	<b>Q. "Graduates do not have adequate work experience?"</b> <b>A.</b> "I agree with that, definitely. There is a lot of theory-based work within colleges and one of the best things that I ever had was a six-week placement when I was doing a BTEC. It's very good to get to know how a centre runs."



## 5. Conclusions

- The employers surveyed expect graduates applying for employment in the outdoor industry to possess an extensive variety of skills, attributes, experience and qualifications, some being valued more highly than others. Employer opinions vary but several common themes have emerged from this study.
- Current literature concentrates mainly on what the government and employers may require, although some research attempts to seek graduate opinion.
- A research project designed to investigate further opinion with the aim of utilising the findings to enhance graduate employability appears to be a worthwhile extension of the project.

## 6. Proposed future research:

**Aims of 2008/2009 project:**

To provide valid and up-to-date research findings on the theme of employability which will, in line with CETL themes:

- lead to development and enhancement of existing curriculum
- inform future curriculum design and the continuing development of university initiatives
- be available to share with HE colleagues of the same and other disciplines and with professional colleagues in the world of outdoor education.

**A methodology** will be developed around the ideas of Biggs (1999) on the theme of 'constructive alignment', aiming to establish links, patterns and themes on employability which are common throughout:

- The findings of the current research project
- Experiences and opinions of undergraduate and graduate Outdoor Education students, lecturers and visiting expert staff
- Relevant current literature
- The World of Work Skills programme at present under development at the LJMU Graduate Skills Centre
- Concurrent research being conducted by the LJMU Sport Development team.

## 7. Acknowledgements

This work was supported by an award from the Centre for Excellence in Leadership and Professional Learning at Liverpool John Moores University. The funding was used to assist with staff time, transport and transcription costs associated with the interviews. Boorman is currently in receipt of a sabbatical award to continue this work in 2009.

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