

# Top 10 things employers look for in university graduates

Increasing your chances of landing a dream job starts on campus. Fran Molloy asks how a student can get an edge.

- Fran Molloy – January 15, 2016

About 180,000 Australian students graduate each year so competition for coveted positions offered by leading organisations is fierce. A big part of the problem is the Australian economy, yet much of the challenge for graduates is individual – convincing an employer you're the one that they want. So we asked the people behind the Top 100 Future Graduates competition, which attracts about 2500 competitors and is sponsored by corporates, for some tips.



Winners: Top 100 Future Graduates competitors in 2015 had leadership skills and work experience as well as top marks.

And we asked recent competition winners – some still at uni, some graduates now gainfully employed – for their insights.

The Top 100 competition selection process includes a detailed written application, online psychometric testing, video and panel interviews. Students are assessed on academic results, work history, other skills and experiences. The latter can include volunteering, sport, music and travel.

The competition is the brainchild of GradConnection ([au.gradconnection.com](http://au.gradconnection.com)) and Fusion Graduate Consultancy ([fusiongc.com.au](http://fusiongc.com.au)). GradConnection director Mike Casey says graduate programs, dozens of which are linked to universities, typically account for about 20 per cent of the graduate employment market. The largest programs may receive 5000-6000 applications a year.

"Some employers are after highly technical, highly skilled graduates, others are after more generalist graduates where it doesn't matter so much what you studied at university, more the fact that you actually have a degree and that you've proven that you can battle your way through university," Casey says. Specialist or generalist, what you take part in on campus, in addition to academic skills and knowledge, is vital. Here's why.

## Be diverse

"There's been a big sway away from just looking at academic results," says Fusion Consulting's Paula Gepp. "Most employers still expect at least a credit average but they really want well-rounded graduates who have done part-time or volunteer work, some travel or coaching or played sport."

### **Go team**

"Employers particularly look at how extracurricular activities show examples of things like teamwork," says Casey. Students who can show they work effectively in groups, share responsibility and accept and deliver constructive feedback and criticism are highly valued.

### **Be ready**

Testing used by recruiters often looks at work-readiness and motivation. "We try to understand what candidates are motivated by, what their actual preferences are and what they have a high natural talent for," Gepp says.

### **Be a leader**

Students who take executive roles in groups at uni and elsewhere, who coach or play a team sport, may have an edge.

### **Experience**

"Working, wherever, is definitely better than not working at all, because it shows that you're well-rounded and that you can hold down a job while you're studying," says Casey. "A few alarm bells go off with employers when they look at someone who gets high distinctions on their transcript, but doesn't have any form of work experience."

### **Your marks**

Develop those time management skills so you can aim for a distinction average while working part-time and volunteering regularly. Employers want to see you can manage your time without spreading yourself too thinly.

### **The forms**

Gepp says she's surprised at how often candidates skip filling in sections of a graduate program application form where there is an opportunity to highlight skills, experience or other talents. Don't just write "see resume". Employers typically test just 20 students for each role they have, so elimination starts with the application form alone. "[Job seekers] are often asked to write about their motivations, they might have to include their subject results and they will be asked about their work and extracurricular experience as well," Gepp says. "Their cover letter, their CV – these might not get read in the initial screening so the application form is important."

### **Those Tests**

Paula Gepp says that most university students do well on general aptitude tests that resemble IQ tests, but those in the second percentile – falling below 80 per cent of respondents – are often eliminated. There are three psychometric tests, literacy, numeracy and pattern recognition, which are timed. Start practising and getting used to such tests before you apply for a graduate program.

### **Who?**

"If students are meeting anyone at all face-to-face from a company they should know about the firm, why they want to work there and be clear on what they are looking for in a job," Gepp says.

### **Creativity**

It helps if you can demonstrate ideas and innovation beyond the degree requirements and show passion for the industry you want to join.

### **Stand out from the crowd**

Students selected in the Top 100 Future Graduates competition have key advice both for those just starting at uni and those already well into a degree. Here's a snapshot of what gives them an edge.

**Krystle Jayne, Bachelor of Information Technology, University of Technology Sydney.**

**Winner:** Deloitte Top IT Student.

**Interests:** president, UTS IT Society; executive member, BUiLD student society; student promotional representative, UTS Faculty of Engineering and IT.

"I've been fortunate to have two full-time internships and two summer internships, but it's not just the work experience but also how you take advantage of the opportunities available at university. I've had a very active university career and took up leadership positions and chances for international travel. Taking advantage of those gives you new perspectives and experiences that many students haven't had yet, which really translates well into the industry."

**Daniel Agnew, Bachelor of Arts (Classical Studies), Australian National University.**

**Interests:** Surfs, plays guitar and piano, cross-country running, fencing, member of Golden Key International Honour Society.

"It's funny now, but the same day I was notified that I had been selected in the Top 100 Most Employable [competition], I got an email from Pizza Hut saying, 'we don't want to hire you'. That was a bit of a low point where everything I heard about a liberal arts degree not getting you anywhere seemed to be true. I'm now working for a government department after applying for graduate positions left, right and centre and getting knocked back because I hadn't had much work experience, despite having a distinction average at ANU. It's really hard to get a face-to-face interview these days, everything is done online."

**Madeline Seagrave, Bachelor of Law/Commerce, Macquarie University**

**Interests:** Works part-time; participates in residential college groups; plays sport.

"It's very important that you're not only willing to put in the effort with study but willing to go out and get first-hand experience or work part-time. I've done quite a few leadership roles throughout high school and I was sports representative at my college last year, which was a big leadership role."

**Tom Perfrement, Bachelor of Chemical Engineering, UNSW**

**Winner:** Arrium Top Engineering and Science student.

**Interests:** president, Chemical Engineering Undergraduate Society (CEUS); UNSW Co-op scholar ambassador.

"The competition was a great way to showcase my abilities and skills to a range of prospective employers, plus you could practice those standard online recruitment assessments and tests. I wanted to get involved as much as I could when I started uni, you do have spare time on your hands to participate in societies or sports or debating or whatever else interests you. It's a bit of a balance, because academic grades are still very important, but you gain skills in things like leadership, communication or teamwork."

**Georgia Knapp, Bachelor of Science, University of Sydney**

**Interests:** Events Coordinator, SU Fred Hollows Society; Chair, SU Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children (FIMRC) Society.

"Volunteer work shows employers a lot about your character. I was on the executive board of two groups I'm really passionate about it. I learned a lot about the world and I learned skills. Running fundraising events for the Fred Hollows Foundation, I learned a lot about leadership and communication."

**Carina Mandic, Bachelor of Commerce (Finance/Marketing), University of Wollongong**

**Interests:** Treasurer, UoW marketing society, events manager of UoW finance society.

"My goal is to get a graduate job at a bank or an investment bank. I work part-time now and I start an internship in late January. I also do some charity work."