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The Importance of Part-Time Work to UK University Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the skills requirements of UK graduate jobs and compare these to part-time jobs typically undertaken by UK university students, to identify similarities and/or differences between them.

A content analysis of 100 graduate jobs and 100 part-time jobs was used as the basis of comparison. The person skills criteria was initially noted for graduate jobs and then this used as a basis for comparison against the part-time jobs. Quantitative analysis was carried out to determine the relationship between the two sets of skills criteria.

Twenty-seven skills criteria were identified in the graduate jobs. It was found that there was a close relationship between the criteria specified in graduate positions and part-time jobs. This highlights the importance of part-time working for university students to gain vital skills to support graduate job applications.

By demonstrating connections between the two types of jobs, and therefore meeting more criteria of the person specification, will hopefully contribute to convincing graduate employers of university students' work readiness.

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The Importance of Part-Time Work to UK University Students

Introduction – The Competitive UK Graduate Jobs Market

Despite an increase in annual employment rates between 2008 and 2018 (DfE, 2019), UK graduates are facing increasing challenges to entering the graduate jobs market and securing an appropriate-level first position (Jones, 2017). A graduate job is one for which a degree is required of the postholder (Targetjobs, 2020), and it is therefore important for an individual, that a graduate-level position is secured post-graduation to justify the time and expense of university study. Yet, inequalities across the sector still exist, with some employers favouring graduates with degrees from prestigious UK universities (Jackson, 2013). Moreover, those individuals with family connections and established networks of contacts provide an advantage in securing higher-level graduate positions (MacMillan et al., 2015). In addition, the choice of degree subject, particularly those of a non-vocational nature, will further limit the breadth of appropriate and/or available graduate positions (Davies, 2020). There is however, evidence that some graduates have an unrealistic expectation prior to entering the jobs market, which restricts their jobs search process and therefore limit the posts they will consider applying for (Hedvicakova, 2018; Mckeown and Lindorff, 2011).

Nonetheless, the UK graduate jobs market remains competitive (Vendolska and Kacerova, 2016). The massification of higher education (Mok and Jiang, 2018; Tight, 2017) has resulted in more graduates pursuing the limited number of available vacancies. This intense competition may well lead to graduates accepting any available position in order to make those first steps into the workplace, since it is found that some graduates are mismatched to their jobs (Steed, 2018; Mavromas et al., 2013; Zakariya, 2017). Alternatively, graduates

can delay their entry into the jobs market by seek to undertaking additional academic awards. Here, student numbers undertaking postgraduate study in the UK has increased by 4% to 585730 in the year to 2018/19 (HESA, 2020). This can however, exacerbate the problem of overqualification (BBC, 2019; Hwang, 2017), a situation where graduates under-utilise their education once in post, resulting in job dissatisfaction (Sam, 2019).

An Uncertain Future for UK Graduates

More recently the contemporary business environment renders graduate employment prospects for the immediate future uncertain. Arguments regarding the long-term impact on graduate careers of Brexit continue in the media (von Sternberg, 2019). Similarly, the impact of the Covid-19 virus on graduate careers is currently being assessed (Gordon, 2020), although current staffing levels especially in office environments in the UK have been significantly reduced (Sales and Tapfield, 2020). The Institute of Student Employers (2020) predicts a significant reduction in available entry-level jobs for Autumn 2020, resulting in a corresponding increase in competition for jobs for those graduating in summer 2020. In addition, World Bank (2020) is currently predicting a global recession, which will potentially further reduce graduate job availability.

UK Graduates – work ready or not?

In addition to the uncertainty created by Brexit and Covid-19, a constant challenge faced by graduates is that UK employers remain unconvinced about graduates' work-readiness credentials (Baska, 2019). While not all employers are adept at assessing the work readiness of graduates (Caballero and Walker, 2010), and employers and graduates may have differing perceptions as to what is meant by work readiness (Ayoubi et al., 2019; Mari et al., 2019), employers generally feel that graduates are not work ready (Chavan and Carter, 2018). It is

the possession of what are known as ‘employability skills’ (see for example, Boden and Nedeva, 2010) which indicate the ability of individuals to do a job successfully that are sought by employers. Here, employers lay blame to the educational provision of universities (Little, 2005; Rhew et al., 2019) for focusing on technical skills, rather than developing desired softer or social skills, such as communication, inter-personal relationships and team-working (Abdullah-Al-Mamun, 2012; Ellis et al., 2014; Garner et al., 2019). Consequently, employers feel that universities do not adequately prepare graduates for the workplace (Konig and Ribaric, 2019; Prikshat et al., 2019). This has led to a number of proposed solutions being offered, with Herbert et al. (2020) demanding more creative solutions from universities in developing appropriate student behaviours alongside academic studies and Jollands et al. (2012) seeking greater emphasis on project-based learning. However, Ritter et al. (2018) and Teng et al. (2019) seek a more radical curriculum re-design, focusing predominantly on the development of soft skills. With Kapareliotis et al. (2019) highlighting the usefulness of internships in raising graduates’ awareness of the demands of employers, the importance of university students gaining some work experience prior to graduating now seems a priority (O’ Brien et al., 2013). The Highfliers publication (2019) indicates that over a third of graduate recruiters warn that graduates who have had no previous work experience at all, are unlikely to be successful during the selection process. Additionally, research has indicated that work experience not only helps support job success post-graduation in securing an appropriate position (Jasiński and Bożykowski (2017) it also enhances individuals’ job quality (Gonzalez-Roma et al., 2018).

The Response of UK Universities

Consequently, universities in the UK have increased the content of work-integrated learning in degree programmes, particularly placement opportunities (Jackson, 2015). It has been found that a work placement, integrated into a learning programme can have a positive impact on job and career prospects (Brooks and Youngson, 2016) by allowing students to practice learned skills in a work setting, engage with practitioners get a better understanding of the respective occupational discipline (Jackson, 2015) and develop transferable skills (Paisley and Paisley, 2010). However, placements are not mandatory in all degrees, and their take-up when offered has not been universal among students (Crawford et al., 2016). In addition, employers have experienced challenges not only in supervising and establishing effective performance, but also in providing students with appropriate activities (Jackson et al., 2016). Moreover, the adverse impact of Covid-19 on placement activities is perceived by students to negatively impact on their ability to complete a work placement (NUS, 2020).

University Students Part-Time Work Activity

The value of part-time work undertaken by students prior to entering a placement has been noted to be beneficial in helping them orientate to the workplace (Neil et al., 2004). Yet, part-time work as an activity in itself, has been argued to help develop students' transferable skills, independent of work-integrated learning (Evans and Richardson, 2017).

Increasing numbers of students work part-time while studying at university (BBC, 2015; NUS, 2019), primarily to earn income to support their lifestyle (Crockford et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2009). If students could however, use their part-time work experience to reconcile acquired skills to those specified in graduate positions, they will be in a more

competitive position at recruitment stage and be better placed to convince employers of their ability to contribute immediately once in the business arena. Yet students typically fail to articulate their part-time work experiences and the corresponding transferable skills acquired, during the graduate recruitment process (Aggett and Busby, 2011; Evans et al., 2015; Owen, 2001), possibly because they have difficulty in relating higher-levels skills developed at university, to the workplace (Cavanagh et al., 2015). The effective reconciliation of skills developed in part-time jobs to those of full-time graduate positions, would therefore, potentially pave the way for students to express them more fully in the graduate recruitment process. To what extent though, do the part-time jobs typically undertaken by university students demand the same or similar, personal skills as those of full-time graduate jobs?

Focus of this paper

The aim of this paper is to examine the specified skills requirements of graduate jobs and compare these to part-time jobs typically undertaken by UK undergraduate university students, to identify similarities and/or differences between the two.

It is hoped by identifying similarities between the required skills of full-time graduate jobs to part-time jobs typically undertaken by UK undergraduate students, that a more ready connection can be made to facilitate students' more effective graduate job applications. Moreover, by demonstrating connections between the two types of jobs, and therefore meeting more criteria of the person specification, will hopefully contribute to convincing graduate employers of students' work readiness.

While undergraduate students' part-time working has been scrutinised by researchers, this has largely focused on its impact on academic studies (see for example, Curtis and Shani,

2002). This work therefore, offers originality by extending the views of Evans and Richardson (2017) by providing a more tangible connection between graduate jobs and the part-time jobs that students do alongside degree studies. In addition, this work should be welcomed at this time in supporting the work-related activities of university students, who may face uncertainty in the graduate jobs market courtesy of Covid-19, Brexit and a possible recession.

Research Approach

Graduate jobs listed on two jobs websites were analysed, one specialising in graduate jobs and one in all job types including those which specified graduate positions. Using two websites was deemed to be necessary to give a broad coverage of graduate positions and to avoid restricting the analysis to those employers with a structured graduate recruitment scheme only. Only UK jobs were analysed. The analysis took place over two days in February 2020, which was before any UK lockdown due to Covid-19, and could therefore be deemed to provide a more typical jobs offering than the current Covid-restricted environment. While over 1000 graduate jobs were listed across the two websites, only jobs that could be applied for by a general degree holders, such as business graduates, were noted, to avoid vocationally specific jobs such as medicine, engineering and science. A number of vacancies were repeated for different areas of the country and some jobs did not explicitly state person requirements and therefore these were ignored.. The first 100 good jobs observed were recorded to provide a useful sample. The jobs advertisements were analysed and the specified person skill criteria for each job noted, excluding academic study requirements such as ‘A’ levels or the degree. The jobs were not tracked-back by to the graduate employers website to see if any further information was available, only the skill criteria

shown on the website advertisement were recorded. The number of citations (mentions) for each skill criteria was then noted down. As the words or phrases used in the job specifications were recorded, some of the criteria were deemed to be semantically close enough to bring together as one criteria, for example, versatile, flexible and adaptable, were deemed to be equivalent. The data was recorded on a spreadsheet to facilitate subsequent quantitative analysis.

A general jobs website offering part-time jobs vacancies was then examined, over two days in early March 2020. Again, the date is significant, since the research was conducted before the Covid-19 lockdown, which by closing shops, offices, restaurants etc. dramatically changed the nature of part-time jobs specified by employers. A search parameter of 25 miles of Bristol was used to limit the number of vacancies to review, although there were still over 3000 initial hits. A specific region of the UK was selected for part-time jobs, since it was felt that university students would seek such employment in relative proximity to their respective university campus. The Bristol area was selected because the area includes city, town, rural and coast settings, which was deemed to potentially offer a broad variety of part-time jobs to attract students. Only general part-time jobs were sought that might be appropriate for a university student studying business to apply for. Part-time jobs that specified specialist skills, such as computer programming or previous experience, were rejected. Similarly, those listed that were selling a franchise organisation or requiring questionnaire completion or completing surveys were ignored. Also, the working hours had to be 15 hours per week or less, since anything over this was felt to conflict with academic studies (Curtis, 2007), although there is research to suggest students do actually work in excess of this figure (McVicar and McKee, 2002). It was found that a number of jobs were duplicated on the website, as they were copied from different online sources, and there was

also repetition for the same job, but in different locations. It was therefore decided to limit the number of part-time jobs to the first 100 good jobs encountered. The person specification skills stated for the 100 part-time jobs was firstly recorded and then examined against the person criteria skills specified for the full-time graduate positions, with the number of mentions recorded on a spreadsheet. Subsequent quantitative analysis was carried out to examine the relationship between the part-time jobs skills against the graduate skill criteria.

Findings and Discussion

Twenty-seven criteria were identified in the person specifications of the graduate jobs (see Table 1). These largely reconcile to previous works identifying transferable graduate skills (see for example, Saunders and Zuzel, 2010; Wellman, 2010). Similarly, McArthur et al. (2017) identified the importance of communication skills, and this was the most commonly occurring criteria here, by a significant margin of 41 citations. This demonstrates the critical importance of effective communication skills to graduates, with job specifications referring to a wide range of communication skill requirements, covering written, verbal and presentation, depending on the job. The next highest specified criteria were grouped in the 20-30 mentions bracket, and this included analytical skills, IT skills and organisational skills. In addition, the ability to connect with colleagues in a team working environment was deemed important, with 24 citations. Least specified was reliability/dependability, with only one citation in the jobs specifications. Similarly, hardworking/strong work ethic had a low number of mentions. Similarly, criteria centring on innovation and new ways of thinking received 23 mentions, suggesting that employers do not look to graduates to be workhorses, but people who can transform the business. Related and potentially reinforcing

the need for graduates to be dynamic, was that willingness to learn was stated in 23 jobs, highlighting the importance of professional development of graduates to employers. This is an important criteria for graduates to note, that learning does not end upon graduation, but continues throughout ones career.

[Table 1 to be placed here]

It was expected that leadership would be highly specified, as employers look to graduates to take on leadership and management positions. Yet only nine out of the 100 jobs specified this criteria. This possibly indicates that employers will look to develop leadership skills of graduates once in post, selecting managers subsequently. This is possibly reinforced by the need for graduates to be ambitious, since this had 26 mentions. Flexibility was specified in 16 graduate jobs, and this supports the view of Vendolska and Kacerova (2016) who feel that flexibility and adaptability are important graduate criteria, again, supporting the requirement that graduates can embrace change.

When the specified person criteria for the part-time jobs were assessed against the graduate criteria (see Table 2), communication also scored highly with 47 mentions, but this time, team working scored higher with 52 citations. This could be the nature of part-time job work requiring greater emphasis on team working, for example, restaurant waiting staff need to work closely with bar and kitchen staff. The need for customer service skills were also highly sought by employers with 41 jobs specifying it, again reinforcing that front-line customer contact typical of jobs in hospitality and retail. While part-time posts are seeking staff who are positive, energetic and can work on their own initiative, employers do not want creative, innovative individuals, since this criteria failed to register any citations. Flexibility scored highly with 23 mentions, possibly because employers look to students to

infill staffing gaps, cover shifts and offer adaptability regarding availability. It could also be that employers want staff to be multi-skilled and take on different roles within the work area.

[Table 2 to be placed here]

Further quantitative analysis was performed to assess any possible significant relationships between the stated graduate person attributes and part-time jobs, and to find out whether the job attributes differ in graduate and part-time employment. A regression analysis model was computed as illustrated in Figure 1 below. The correlation coefficient of $R^2 = 0.2616$ suggests a good relationship. This figure indicates that there is only 26% of variability in graduate attributes, as explained by the regression of graduate attributes on part-time attributes.

The model, $y = 0.4341x + 13.484$, where part-time job attributes (x) could contribute towards the attributes of future graduate jobs (y), demonstrates a significant relationship between variables (part-time and graduate attributes) where the p-value of 0.00 is less than the alpha value of 0.05 (α). The result also indicates that there were no large differences between graduate and part-time attributes, and that working part-time while in higher education is an important enhancement of graduate attributes and employability. This is an especially important finding for university students, who can look to part-time work to improve their work-readiness credentials and enhance graduate applications as a result. Further details of this analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

[Figure 1 to be placed here]

The 27 skills criteria specified in the job advertisements were then sub-divided into three categories, with 12 attributes considered as skills, 7 for traits and 8 attributes allotted to behaviours. Traits are related to an individual's personality or character (e.g. extrovert or introvert) and desirable behaviours refer to how an individual responds to stimuli (see Mullins, 2019, for further details of these classifications). A comparative mean among these three categories were illustrated in Figure 2. Interestingly the result further confirmed that there was not a significant difference in the attributes expected by both graduate and part-time employers, apart from the skills category with 40% differences from total citations of jobs advertised. Personal attributes in behaviour, such as work ethics, attention to details, self-resilience and development were also found consistent among graduate and part-time employers. These attributes were regarded as important between the two type of jobs (see the score on ranking).

Meanwhile, attributes for traits, such as proactive, flexible/versatile, and passionate were almost equal to the average score of 14 citations among the 100 jobs reviewed from each job-type. However, the level of ranking for attributes on confident/outgoing personality and competitiveness were perceived more important for graduate positions than for part-time jobs. Further detail on the comparisons can be found in appendix 2.

[Figure 2 to be placed here]

[Figure 3 to be placed here]

Conclusion

The specified person criteria for graduate and part-time jobs demonstrated some notable similarities, particularly the importance of effective communication, providing excellent customer service and the ability to connect with colleagues and work in a team environment. This is important, since it suggests that students will be able to develop skills needed to secure graduate positions, courtesy of their part-time work activities. This research reconciles to the work of Muldoon (2009) who recognises the value of part-time work to graduate employability. In this way, part-time work should help provide students with a conduit into graduate jobs, by improving work-readiness.

The findings may have implications for students who need to look carefully at the part-time jobs they seek, in order to think more strategically on the implications for their career, rather than merely for maximum money or ease of fit to university timetable. It also will have implications for universities who need to encourage and support rather than deter part-time working, as previously recommended by Robotham (2012). Employers who depend upon student labour might consider offering more attractive propositions based on skill development, rather than monetary rewards. It will make those students who do not work, re- consider their situation. This may however, require students to stop thinking of themselves solely in students terms, but identify themselves as workers, for which part-time work is the first step in their respective careers. However, Daniels and Brooker (2014) find that students and workers have different identities in respect of work readiness, which could be problematic for students to embrace a different, more long-term perspective.

Students may need to closely examine the specified job requirements of their desired graduate jobs and see what skills will be needed and map those out against their study,

part-time work, placement and other experience. This will highlight any gaps that need to be filled in their make-up. If their existing skills do not reconcile to the desired graduate job, they should consider moving to part-time work or other work-related activities that will support and endorse their graduate credentials. Individuals will then need to highlight their transferable skills more effectively to employers. However, there is evidence that students do not really understand what value part-time work brings to their CV, merely having some vague hope that it adds value (Evans et al., 2014). This study identifies the value of that part-time work by linking person criteria to graduate positions. Here is where universities can help students identify gaps in their profiles and direct them accordingly, with Chen and Hu (2008) demanding that universities provide more guidance in supporting graduates into appropriate jobs.

There is clearly a role for universities in supporting and developing skills not developed by part-time work, particularly creative and innovative skills. Moreover, some criteria were somewhat tenuous, such as resilience, which is perhaps more implicitly demonstrated by students perhaps juggling part-time work, university, social life, or by knock-backs in university work and how they were overcome positively. Students will need to reflect on themselves to determine best examples of how this has been achieved. Nonetheless, the examples might be enhanced due to the part-time working activity, for example, good time-management could be demonstrated by explaining how managing to balance study, work and personal life was achieved.

This work has sought to examine graduate job skills against those specified in part-time jobs, in order to determine any relationship that might benefit university students in their pursuit of graduate positions. This study clearly highlights the importance of part-time jobs for

students in supporting graduate applications. It is however, a small-scale piece of research, comprising a snapshot at a particular point of time, and therefore needing further analysis. It was anticipated that the job descriptions of part-time jobs could be assessed against graduate skills/behaviours. However, there was little specific connections to facilitate that study, with most related criteria being implied rather than explicitly expressed, for example keeping shelves stocked would support customer satisfaction for a shopping visit, but this was not clearly stated. Nonetheless, the job descriptions of part-time jobs are typically comprised of useful phrases that will support this endeavour, for example, “Ensuring high levels of customer satisfaction by being knowledgeable on all products offered, and teaming up with co-workers to provide excellent sales service”. Graduates need to be able to recognise these useful phrases, using them to their advantage to articulate their work experience in graduate applications, in order to emphasise the skill developed in the part-time job. Again, university career services should be supporting this activity. This work could be further extended with qualitative analysis, especially through interviewing university students as to how part-time work is perceived to develop graduate skills, but also how it supports and drives their graduate career aspirations. The paper has also focused on the UK higher education and jobs market, and therefore any international context should be welcomed as a comparison, especially given the unique prevailing circumstances in the UK, of Brexit and Covid-19 adversely effecting education and industry. Moreover, a more longitudinal study to examine the effects of these factors, particularly if there is any structural change to both graduate and part-time jobs resulting from Brexit and Covid-19.

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[Appendix 1 to be placed here]

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The Importance of Part-Time Work to UK University Students

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Graduate Criteria identified in Graduate Jobs

Skills, Traits, Behaviours specified in Graduate Jobs	No. of Times Cited in Graduate Jobs	Ranking
Analytical skills/Think Logically/Structured approach to decisions	25	6
Problem solver	20	=12
Excellent Communication skills (verbal, presentation, written)/ articulate/eloquent)	69	1
Strong work ethic/Hardworking	18	=14
Attention to detail	27	3
Excellent customer/Client service	14	21
IT/Digital Skills/MS programs	26	=4
Organisational skills/Planning skills/Well organised	28	2
Curious/Inquisitive/Open-minded/ Creative/Innovative/Entrepreneurial/ New ways of thinking/Think Outside the box/New ideas	23	=8
Resilience/Persistence/Tenacious	15	20
Proactive/Can-do attitude/Self-starter/Work on own initiative	21	11
Leadership skills/qualities	9	23
Partner with other people/Team player	24	7
Flexible/Adaptable/Versatile/Embrace change	16	19
Motivated/Self-motivated	18	=14
Build/Nurture relationships (mainly specified with clients)	17	18
Time management skills/Tight deadlines/Prioritise/ Work under pressure	20	=12
Commitment to self-development/Growth/Willingness to learn	23	=8
Commitment to values (e.g. Diversity, integrity)	4	26
Commercial awareness/Business Acumen/Current affairs	18	=14
Confident/Outgoing personality	18	=14
Task Driven/Target driven	10	22
Reliable/Dependable	1	27
Project management skills	6	25
Aptitude for numbers/Numerically confident	7	24
Positive energy/Energetic/Enthusiastic/Passionate	23	=8
Ambitious/Determined to succeed/Competitive	26	=4

Table 2: Graduate Criteria identified in Part-Time Jobs

Skills, Traits, Behaviours specified in Graduate Jobs	No. of Times Cited in Part-Time Jobs	Ranking
Analytical skills/Think Logically/Structured approach to decisions	1	=22
Problem solver	1	=22
Excellent Communication skills (verbal, presentation, written)/ articulate/eloquent)	47	2
Strong work ethic/Hardworking	11	14
Attention to detail	18	9
Excellent customer/Client service	41	3
IT/Digital Skills/MS programs	16	10
Organisational skills/Planning skills/Well organised	19	8
Curious/Inquisitive/Open-minded/ Creative/Innovative/Entrepreneurial/ New ways of thinking/Think Outside the box/New ideas	0	=26
Resilience/Persistence/Tenacious	3	=18
Proactive/Can-do attitude/Self-starter/Work on own initiative	25	5
Leadership skills/qualities	3	=18
Partner with other people/Team player	52	1
Flexible/Adaptable/Versatile/Embrace change	23	6
Motivated/Self-motivated	8	=15
Build/Nurture relationships (mainly specified with clients)	13	=11
Time management skills/Tight deadlines/Prioritise/ Work under pressure	21	7
Commitment to self-development/Growth/Willingness to learn	12	13
Commitment to values (e.g. Diversity, integrity)	3	=18
Commercial awareness/Business Acumen/Current affairs	1	=22
Confident/Outgoing personality	4	17
Task Driven/Target driven	13	=11
Reliable/Dependable	8	=15
Project management skills	1	=22
Aptitude for numbers/Numerically confident	2	21
Positive energy/Energetic/Enthusiastic/Passionate	27	4
Ambitious/Determined to succeed/Competitive	0	=26

Figure 1: Positive relationship of graduate and part-time job attribute

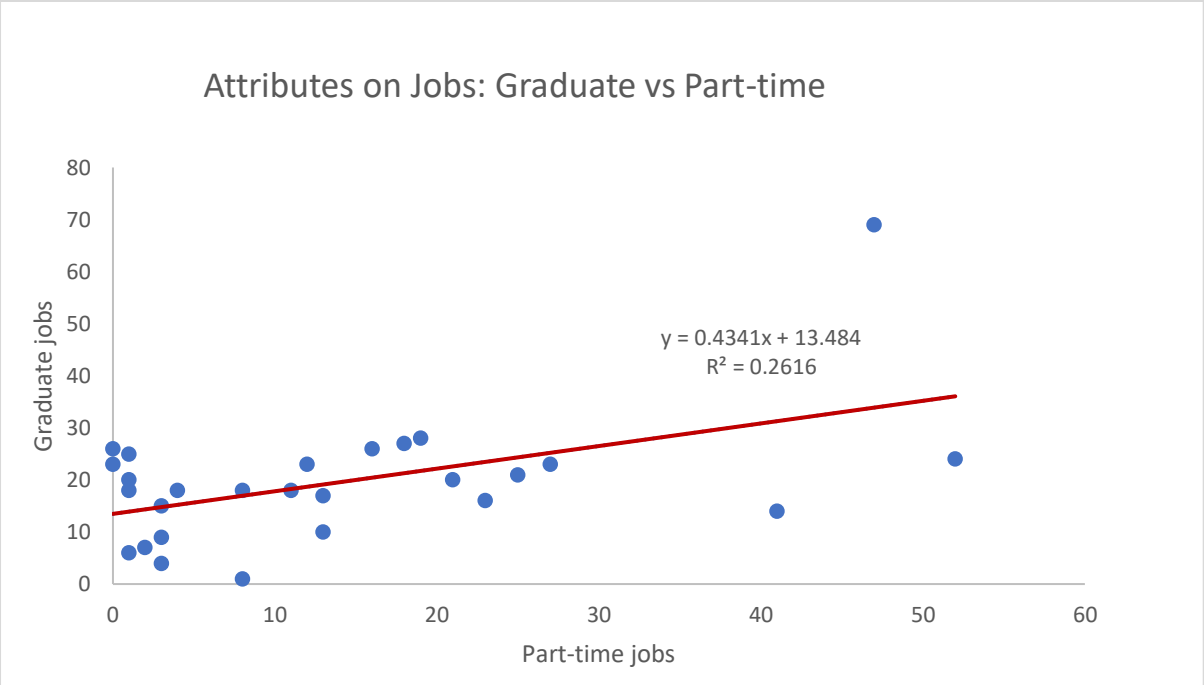


Figure 2: Mean of citations based on skills, traits and behaviours between two jobs: Graduate and Part-time

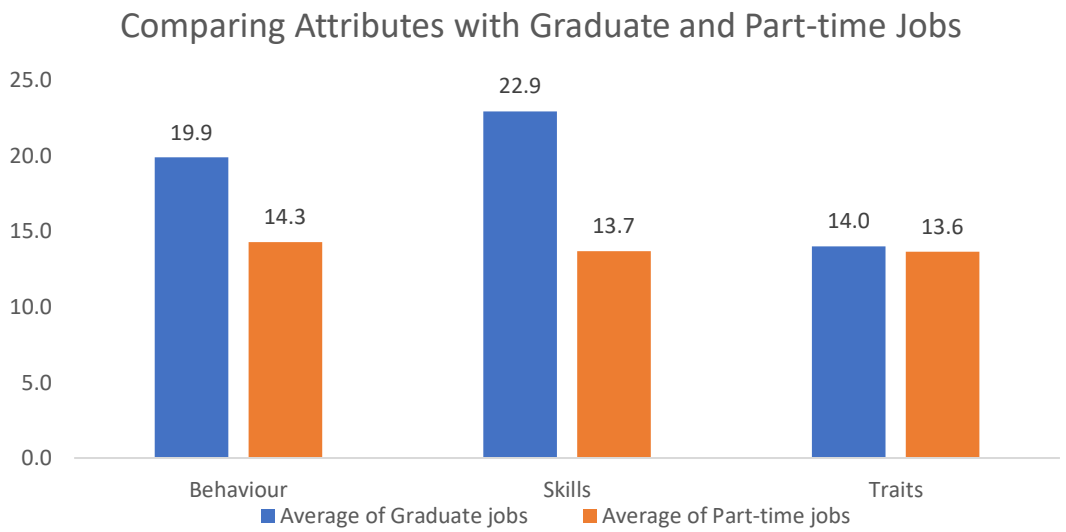
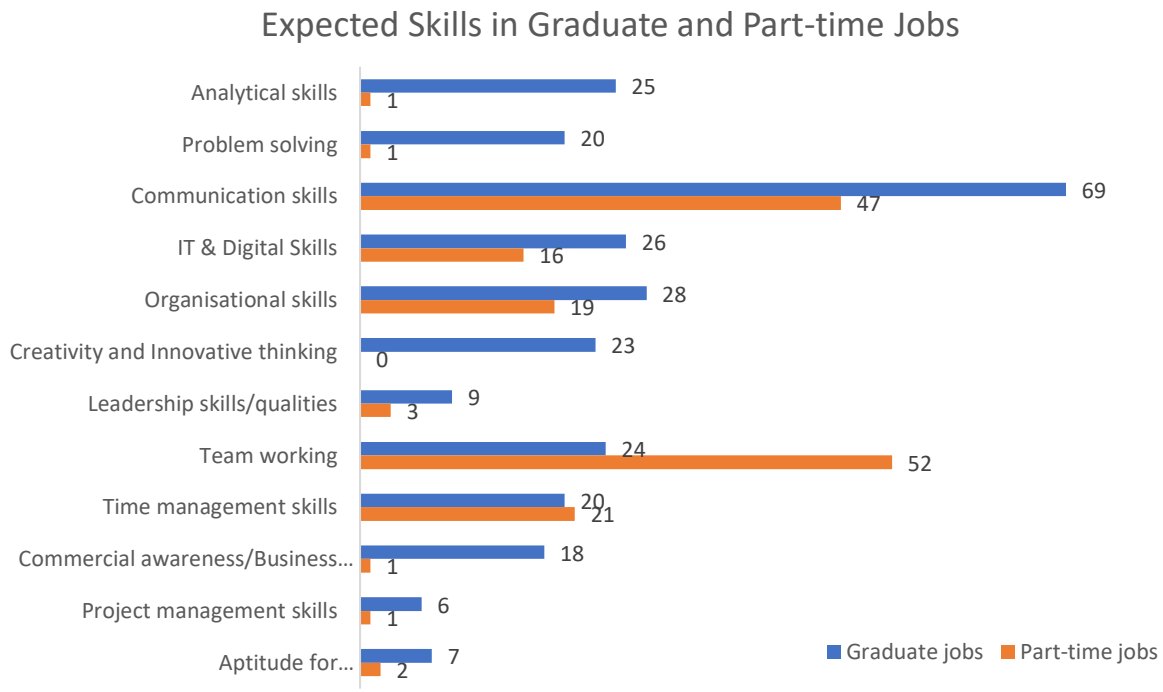


Figure 3: Expected skills recognised by employers

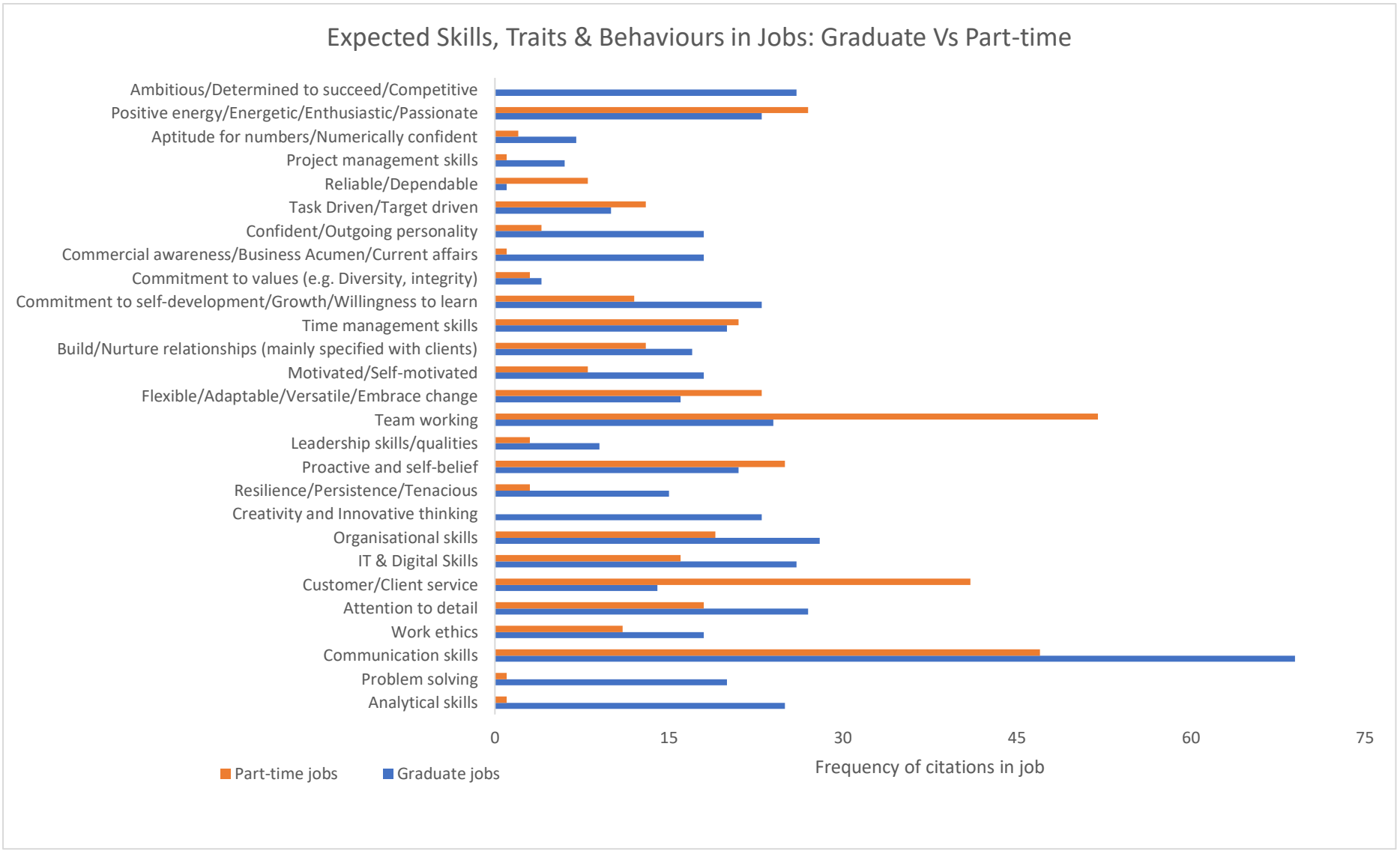


Appendix 1: Output of regression analysis between graduate and part-time job's attributes

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.5115
R Square	0.2616
Adjusted R Square	0.2321
Standard Error	10.8047
Observations	27

ANOVA

	df	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*Significance F*
Regression	1	1034.218011	1034.218	8.8591	0.0064
Residual	25	2918.522729	116.7409		
Total	26	3952.740741			

	Coefficients	*Standard Error*	*t Stat*	*P-value*	*Lower 95%*	*Upper 95%*	*Lower 95.0%*	*Upper 95.0%*
Intercept	13.4844	2.8954	4.6571	0.0001	7.5212	19.4476	7.5212	19.4476
Part-time jobs	0.4341	0.1458	2.9764	0.0064	0.1337	0.7345	0.1337	0.7345

Appendix 2: Comparison on jobs attributes between graduate and part-time jobs