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Working in nutrition: interim analysis of a national survey exploring nutrition graduate employers' perceptions of graduate skillset and career readiness

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Approximately half of Australian universities offer a degree in nutrition, nutrition science, human nutrition or nutrition combined with another discipline. In the absence of any formal accreditation requirements, the design of nutrition undergraduate courses is guided by national nutrition science competencies⁽¹⁾. Degrees might also include specialisations such as in public health, food industry or animal nutrition, and a range of special interest topics included to enhance the graduate skillset for the workforce. This diversity in degrees develops graduates with broad and transferrable skills, thought to be desirable to industry employers. In an earlier study by the authors⁽²⁾, it was identified that graduates placed high value on nutrition science theory and practical content, but there was an expressed desire for more work-integrated-learning opportunities and professional skill development for work in private practice. To triangulate the perspectives of students and graduates, there is a need for universities to understand how nutrition graduates are received by employers. This paper will present preliminary findings from the Working in Nutrition Employer (WIN-E) study. The aims of this study were to build on findings from the WIN-G study⁽²⁾ and explore the perceptions of nutrition graduate employers in Australia regarding aspects of the graduate skillset that were highly valued, and identify training gaps. After being tested for face validity, the purpose-built WIN-E survey was delivered online via Qualtrics between June–December 2022. The survey included a mix of 32 closed- and open-ended questions about employer characteristics, additional education, employment and professional experience, and employers perceived graduate preparedness for the workforce. An interim analysis revealed that 110 participants had given informed consent; of these, 41 completed 75% of the questions, with 32 having relevance to nutrition graduate employment, and were included in the current analyses. Most respondents were female (n = 25, 78%) aged 25–34 years (n = 13, 52%). Respondents predominantly identified as working in education (n = 8), research (n = 5) or in 'other settings' (n = 5) such as community aged care, digital media/coaching, food preparation, agriculture or homelessness project work. To a lesser extent domains in retail/hospitality (n = 4), food industry (n = 3), public health/not for profit (n = 2), clinical (n = 2) and sport and fitness (n = 1) were represented. Fifteen (47%) employers felt nutrition graduates had all, or some of the expected skills and attributes at time of employment. More development of skills in written health translation (n = 2), data analysis (n = 1), working collaboratively in health systems (e.g., aged care) (n = 2), marketing (n = 1), and understanding transferable skillsets with the motivation for ongoing professional development were also valued (n = 2). Further data analysis will provide more context around the roles and responsibilities employers typically assign to nutrition graduates, highlighting potential training gaps and opportunities for universities to better prepare graduates for the workforce.

References

1. Lawlis T, Torres S, Coates A *et al.* (2019) *Asia Pac J Clin Nutr* **28**(1), 166–176.
2. Clark K, Biesiekierski J, Farrer OD *et al.* (2024) *J Hum Nutr Diet* **37**(3), 685–694.