

## Abstract

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# A qualitative investigation into the essential knowledge and skills for early career nutritionists in New Zealand

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The nutrition workforce plays a vital role in disease prevention and health promotion, with expanding job opportunities shaped by factors like aging populations, climate change, global food systems, and advancing technologies<sup>(1,2)</sup>. Preparing students for careers that require adaptability involves understanding the valuable skills they possess and identifying any gaps. This research aimed to identify the skills and knowledge valued by students who had recently completed work-based placements, and explore recent graduates' experiences, challenges, and preparedness for employment. At the end of their work-based placements students give presentations sharing their experiences and learning. Permission was sought from ten students to analyse the recordings of these presentations. The presentations were selected to include a range of nutrition fields, including sports nutrition, public health, community nutrition, dietary counselling, food and industry, and nutrition communication. Additionally, a list of graduates (within four years of graduation) from various fields (as above) was compiled and they were invited to participate. Semi-structured interviews (n=10) were conducted online via Zoom and recorded. The interview guide included open-ended questions on employment experiences, challenges, preparedness, and required skills. The interviews, transcription and analyses were completed by two student researchers between November 2023 and February 2024. Thematic analysis using NVivo software was used to identify themes. The themes developed included the importance of skills relating to; i) communicating complex nutrition concepts to the public, ii) collaborating within diverse teams, iii) identifying and filling personal knowledge gaps. In addition Graduates felt practical experience from their University study boosted their preparedness for the workforce, though many struggled to apply their skills in non-traditional roles and expand their career scope. In summary, ongoing focus on team-based projects, communication with non-science audiences, and strategies for continuous learning using evidence-based sources are crucial for both undergraduate and postgraduate education.

**Keywords:** nutritionist; qualitative; skills; knowledge

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## References

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