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What do undergraduate nutrition students know about employability and workplace expectations?

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Throughout a three-year undergraduate nutrition degree, students learn the theoretical knowledge and technical skill set required to become a nutritionist. However, nutrition curriculum does not always include an opportunity to practice the application of knowledge and skills in a real-world setting or develop an understanding of the transferable skills required in a workplace, thus, general employability skills and information on workplace expectations are not developed⁽¹⁾. A mixed methods research study was undertaken to understand student perspectives of employer expectations and general employability skills. A validated work-ready tool⁽¹⁾ was used to survey undergraduate nutrition students at Australian universities (n = 171); students who participated in an industry placement were interviewed pre/post placement (n = 22); nutrition industry experts and employers (n = 9) were interviewed and an industry focus group (n = 6) was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of including curriculum that developed employability skills and exposure to workplaces and expectations. Survey data showed 74% of students had an understanding of how to effectively use their skills in the workplace, 75% indicated they knew what was expected of them if they used their skills in the workplace, and 64% understood the steps in the process of using their skills. Students who completed an employability subject at one university were invited to complete the same survey upon completion and 100% of students reported having this knowledge and understanding. Thematic analysis of student interviews revealed multiple benefits of placement such as industry insights; role clarity; deeper understanding of workplace expectations; the opportunity to practice application of knowledge and skills, identify unknown information, gain experience; networking opportunities; feeling better prepared for interviews and job searching post-degree and improved confidence across all themes identified. Thematic analysis of industry interviews and focus groups also revealed themes related to the benefits of a placement experience for students. Employers identified placement as an opportunity for students to develop an understanding of graduate and workplace expectations; better understand roles and industry; practice application of knowledge and skills; and to develop networks and confidence. Employers also identified a lack of confidence in some students asking for help; students' inability to translate scientific knowledge to a range of lay audiences; and an understanding of how nutrition works with or within other departments, and suggested that employability skills should be developed within courses and/or on placement to better prepare students for the workplace. The results indicate that the inclusion of employability development and/or placements within the curriculum develops an understanding of the employability skills required by nutrition graduates, builds greater awareness of employment expectations, roles, industry, and workplaces, and provides an opportunity to practice the application of their knowledge and skills resulting in improved graduate confidence.

References

1. Kapareliotis I, Voutsina K, Patsiotis A (2019) *High Educ Ski Work-based Learn* 9(4), 538–549.