

Subjective Measures of Career Outcomes from National Surveys in the United Kingdom and Australia

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Abstract: This article considers various subjective and qualitative measurements of career outcomes and success found in national-level graduate surveys in the United Kingdom and Australia. It reviews how these measures might add to our broader understanding of career success aligned with social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2002) and reflects on the concept of “scarring” (Borland, 2020). These considerations help assess the value of measuring subjective and qualitative information on graduate career outcomes and how such insights might inform career and employability services and inclusive and integrated career-focused activities in higher education.

Keywords: career outcomes, career success, graduate surveys, higher education

The United Kingdom (UK) and Australia have a long history of graduate surveying, with many decades of comprehensive national graduate outcomes data from higher education (HE; Frawley & Harvey, 2015). Measurements of graduate outcomes are used by individual HE providers, the HE sector, and national governments in multiple ways, such as a mark of quality or an indicator of value for money, as information for potential candidates, and as a factor in funding allocations.

Initially, this paper outlines the HE context in both the UK and Australia. It looks at the graduate surveying process and provision in each country, drawing out a selection of the subjective measures in each survey to inform the reader about the data available and its existing and potential uses. This is then considered in light of careers and employability theory and research, and recommendations are drawn for career professionals, HE providers, the HE sector, and local and national governments. The paper explores to what extent additional self-reported measures in graduate surveys add to our broader understanding of career journeys and success.

Theoretical Frameworks

This paper takes a rigorous approach grounded in careers and employability research by utilising social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2002), which focuses on individual thought processes when making career decisions. This theory “highlights people’s

capacity to direct their own vocational behaviour (i.e., human agency), yet it also acknowledges the many environmental influences [...] that serve to strengthen, weaken, or even override human agency in career development” (Lent et al., 2002, p. 277). This marrying of career decision-making with the external factors that may support or limit the individual’s ability to enact, or follow through on, their plans has the potential to be further explored through the subjective questions in the UK Graduate Outcomes Survey (UK-GOS) and the Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey (Aus-GOS) that explore how personal circumstances affect career decision-making and success. Furthermore, social cognitive career theory identified personal characteristics that affect graduate outcomes, such as sex and gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status (Bolton & Lewis, 2024; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Toogood, 2025). It also focused on how contextual influences, such as family or peers, combine with self-efficacy beliefs and the individual’s outcome expectations to affect career choice behaviours. Other contextual influences include economic background as well as ‘person inputs’ such as gender, ethnicity, and disability.

Looking more broadly at what is known about careers, existing employability research underscores the importance of adopting a long-term perspective, considering career development across a lifespan rather than focusing solely on the first job after graduating (Tymon, 2013). Nevertheless, national policymakers, HE providers, and individuals often emphasise the graduates’ first destination as a measure of success, potentially because this is the primary focus of graduate outcomes surveys. A significant proportion of students pursue HE primarily to enhance their employment prospects (Baik et al., 2019). A key measure of success from the students’ perspective may, therefore, be whether their degree has met this expectation and whether they have secured a role.

Reviewing Australian data, 79% of graduates secure full-time employment within 4-6 months of completing their degrees (Aus-GOS, 2023). However, a notable 27.8% are employed in positions where they do not fully utilise their skills or qualifications (Aus-GOS, 2023). This condition, termed “career-undermatching,” involves graduates accepting roles below their skill levels and qualifications. Pennington and Stanford (2019) noted that this mismatch typically leads to lower wages and restricted career advancement, with long-term adverse consequences to overall well-being and lifetime earnings. This pattern is also seen in the UK, where research from the Social Mobility Commission in 2017 showed that over a decade, only one in six workers who started that period in low-paid work could be classed as “escaper” who successfully made a sustained move away from low paid work by the end of the period (D’Arcy & Finch, 2017). Graduates who begin their careers in positions that underutilise their skills are likely to remain underemployed, a phenomenon known as “scarring” (Borland, 2020). These roles often offered lower job satisfaction and stability (Pennington & Stanford, 2019), leading to prolonged negative impacts on a graduate’s career trajectory (Bills et al., 2017; Ng & Feldman, 2007).

Social cognitive career theory reminds us that graduates from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to these outcomes, facing higher risks of unemployment and underemployment. Bradley et al. (2008) found that Australian graduates from lower SES backgrounds were disproportionately represented in non-graduate roles—jobs that do not require a degree. Upon graduation, students from

low SES backgrounds experienced lower full-time employment rates and earned below-average graduate salaries (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017; Pitman et al., 2019). These students also faced barriers in accessing competitive graduate roles and are less likely to secure high-status occupations (Burke, 2015; Reay et al., 2009; Rivera, 2012; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Kozman and Khan (2024) showed that in the UK, there are differences in graduate earnings by free school meal status, gender, and race. Outcomes are also affected by gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status, all indicating inequity (Bolton & Lewis, 2024). The increasing polarisation of jobs, partly due to technological advances, has been linked to an observed decline in mobility (García-Peñalosa et al., 2023; Xu, 2023). This problem could, therefore, worsen in the coming decades.

Therefore, it is timely and valuable to reflect on whether the self-reported, subjective data available via national graduate surveys in the UK and Australia can provide further insight into the meaning of graduate career ‘success’. While it is unquestionably true that initial post-graduation employment statistics provide valuable insight, there is a need to look beyond solely quantitative measures such as the percentage of graduates in employment. This paper explores the value of subjective and qualitative questions to capture a more nuanced picture of graduate success.

National Higher Education Contexts in the UK and Australia

There are almost 300 HE providers in the UK, ranging from small specialist institutions to very large universities. Collectively, these providers educated 2.86 million students in 2021/22, the majority of whom were UK students studying as undergraduates for a first degree (Bolton, 2024). The UK also has a significant cohort of international students and a thriving transnational education market (Gordon & Modhvadiya, 2023). The London Economics 2023 impact report for Universities UK identified that the UK HE sector is responsible for a direct economic impact to the UK of £46.1 billion, along with a further £69.5 billion in indirect and induced impact. This equated to a gross value-added impact from UK HE of £71.3 billion, which included operational and capital expenditure, direct spending via institutional supply chains, and 768,000 HE-related jobs and subsequent employee spending (Booth et al., 2023).

Australia has around 197 HE providers, comprising 42 universities and 155 non-university higher education institutions (NUHEI; Norton, 2023). The NUHEIs consist of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, and specialist international, creative arts, and theological colleges. Most (37 out of 42) Australian universities are publicly funded and comprise the bulk of HE enrollments, educating around 1.6 million students. Like the UK, international students are also a vital source of income for Australian universities, providing around \$AUD8.6 billion, or just over a quarter of all university funding. International student numbers have climbed steadily since the pandemic. While Australia shares similarities with the UK and other western HE systems, there are differences. Unlike the UK or the USA, where students often leave home to attend university, students in Australia tend to commute and, therefore, often attend the university closest to their home.

In both countries, the social impacts of an established HE sector are evident. In the UK, HE is a key driver of social mobility; low-income students are four times more likely to become socially mobile if they attend university, and lower income gaps are seen between graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers when compared to income gaps among non-graduates (The Sutton Trust, 2021). However, it should be noted that equity of HE access and outcome is not consistent across students' ethnicity, sex and gender, disability, and socioeconomic status (Bolton & Lewis, 2024; CFE Research, 2022; Skills Development Scotland, 2023). There are also differences in how each of the four nations within the UK funds its HE provision, resulting in differences in students' fees, grants, and loans. This has the potential to further impact inclusion, accessibility, and equity across the UK and within each nation.

In Australia, HE equity policies have consistently focused on increasing participation from five underrepresented groups: individuals from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, non-English-speaking background individuals, residents of regional/remote areas, Indigenous people, and individuals with a disability. Despite reforms seeking to widen participation and address skills shortages, such as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme in 1989, the Review of Australian Higher Education (i.e., Bradley Review; Bradley et al., 2008), and the demand-driven system (Kemp & Norton, 2013), challenges such as funding constraints, rising student debt, and disparities in access persist. Current policies are based on forecasts that predict that by 2050, 55% of the Australian workforce will require a degree, representing a substantial leap from current levels (Department for Education, 2024). The Australian Universities Accord was developed and introduced in mid-2024 in response to this and other issues. The Accord aims to address these issues by creating a more sustainable and equitable HE system via re-evaluating funding models, enhancing support for disadvantaged students, and fostering closer ties between universities and industry to better align educational outcomes with labour market needs.

Measuring Graduate Outcomes

United Kingdom

Graduate outcomes data has been systematically collected in the UK for around 60 years in various formats, firstly via the First Destination Survey and then the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey. After an extensive review in 2016, the current UK-GOS has run for all leavers from the academic year 2017/18 onwards (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2024a). Earlier surveys largely focused on the industries that graduates entered, but increasingly, the focus has been on individual and cohort outcomes and roles. The positioning of the main survey point has also shifted over time; UK-GOS asks all graduates for information about their activities 15 months after the end of the course; DLHE collected that information after 6 months, with a further longitudinal follow-up survey at 3.5 years (Frawley & Harvey, 2015). The UK also has a Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset, which connects educational data to employment and earnings.

The current UK-GOS is managed by the HESA, part of Jisc (<https://jisc.ac.uk>), the UK digital, data and technology agency focused on tertiary education, research and innovation. They

manage the data collection process and subsequent response coding, working with external surveying providers. UK-GOS is a population survey and thus aims to survey the entire population of interest. In any given year, the population comprises all full-time or part-time students reported as obtaining relevant HE qualifications. This includes first degrees (undergraduate), postgraduate taught degrees, and postgraduate research degrees. The population is divided into four cohorts by date of completion, with separate survey contact periods for each cohort. Within each contact period, online survey links are shared, and for UK-domiciled graduates only, this is followed up with a telephone survey when the online survey elicits no response. Response rates have been showing a small but sustained drop in recent years (44% of responses were usable in 2021/22, 46% in 2020/21, and 52% in 2019/20), and response rates are higher for UK-domiciled graduates than internationally domiciled graduates (HESA, 2024b).

The dataset is shared in various ways, with many of the national level and HE provider statistics freely available through HESA's open data repository (HESA, 2024b). This repository allows data to be broken down by a range of factors, such as personal characteristics and subject of study. Uses of the UK-GOS dataset include national league tables such as those available from the Complete University Guide, The Guardian, and The Times newspapers, as well as applicant-focused sites such as Discover Uni (<https://discoveruni.gov.uk>). HE providers use the data to support strategic evaluation and improvement via feedback from the measures in UK-GOS, which allow internal and external benchmarking. The data also supports HE provider submission for national quality evaluations such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (Fung, 2024). The results of UK-GOS are often used extensively in providers' marketing materials and information, potentially attracting students and bolstering retention.

Australia

Like the UK, Australia has a long history of graduate surveying. The routine surveying of graduates commenced in 1972 with the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). The AGS served as the national census for newly qualified HE graduates and was conducted annually from 1972 to 2015 by Graduate Careers Australia (2024). However, collecting, analysing, and presenting the data took around two years, resulting in a significant delay between the completion of studies and data publication and analysis. In 2016, the AGS was replaced by the Aus-GOS, and the process transitioned to an online format. This move was part of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) initiative, which provided comprehensive data on graduate outcomes to improve education quality and graduate success in Australia. Over 400,000 students, graduates, and employers respond to a QILT survey each year. QILT is a set of four government-endorsed surveys, as outlined in Table 1. This paper focuses solely on the Aus-GOS, but information on the other QILT surveys is included to show Australia's holistic approach to surveying. While each survey measures different aspects, they all work together to provide performance information for the whole student life cycle from commencement to employment and beyond.

Table 1. *Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching Survey Types and Measures*

Survey Name	Participants	Measures
Student Experience Survey	Current HE students.	The overall student experience.
Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey (Aus-GOS)	Graduates 4-6 months after course completion. Undergraduate and postgraduate. Domestic and onshore international students.	Labour force and further study outcomes.
Employer Satisfaction Survey	Employers who have employed a recent graduate. 4-6 months post-graduation.	Employers' views on their recent graduate hires' skills and work readiness.
Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal	Graduates 3-4 years after course completion. A follow-up to those graduates who opted-in from the GOS.	Medium-term employment and further study outcomes, supplementing the GOS.

In addition to employment, the core Aus-GOS questionnaire also measures further study outcomes, graduate preparation, and level of satisfaction. Survey responses are also used to build the Employer Satisfaction Survey sample. Aus-GOS is administered three times a year in November, February, and May. The survey takes around 10-15 minutes to complete. A series of follow-up reminders and prizes are on offer to increase participation. The 2023 Aus-GOS was conducted among 126 HE institutions, including all 42 universities and 84 NUHEIs. The NUHEIs represented 7.6% of total responses. A total of 116,250 valid survey responses were collected across all study levels, representing a response rate of 38.7 percent, a slight decrease from the 39.4 percent achieved in 2022.

Data collected from the surveys is published annually and available on the QILT website (<https://qilt.edu.au>). The survey results are displayed in various formats at the national, state, and individual institution levels. QILT data is instrumental for HE providers, serving multiple critical functions and enabling benchmarking. The Australian government uses QILT data to inform policy decisions and allocate funding. Additionally, the data powers two comparison websites, ComparED (<https://www.compared.edu.au>), which allows current and prospective students to compare courses and institutions based on real student feedback, and CourseSeeker (<https://www.courseseekeer.edu.au>), which shows course information, entry requirements, and admission processes.

The extensive data collected from graduates in the UK and Australia via the above surveys are frequently used to quantify certain aspects of graduate outcomes, such as employment or salary. However, the subjective questions also have the potential to offer a more nuanced insight into graduate career experiences, motivations, and outcomes. Selected career theories that help to underpin this insight are identified in the next section of this paper before these elements are drawn together in the discussion section.

Subjective Questions in Graduate Outcomes Survey Design

The UK and Australian surveys both collect quantitative outcome data, e.g., salary, and more subjective and qualitative self-reported data from graduates (e.g., well-being and job preparedness). To review whether these measures add to our broader understanding of career journeys and success, some subjective questions and responses from the most recently published data in each country are included in this section. The full UK-GOS question set (HESA, 2023) and most recent results (HESA, 2024b) are available from HESA. The Aus-GOS question set and results are available from QILT (2024). All the statistics in the following sections come from these sources.

United Kingdom

This section focuses specifically on self-reported subjective and/or qualitative measures collected from UK-GOS graduates as part of the standard survey. This includes to what extent the individual's recent qualification played a part in their current activity, how their education has contributed to where they are today, and how they feel about their current situation and general well-being level (Office for Students [OfS], 2024). A series of optional question banks are available for institutions to request at an extra charge, but as these are not taken up universally, they are not considered further.

UK-GOS respondents are asked what they are doing at the time of the survey, with an immediate follow-up question, "which of these activities do you consider to be your most important activity?" A note of clarification is provided: "Your most important activity might be the one which is most related to your future plans, the one which pays you the most money, or the one that you spend the most time doing." This allows the graduate to shape how their response appears in the national dataset, and to identify what is personally important to them. The responses to this question are in Table 2, which shows that the majority of survey respondents (61%) identify full-time employment as their most important activity, followed by part-time employment (11%) and then employment and further study (10%). These questions must be answered for a valid survey response.

Table 2. 2021–2022 Graduate Outcomes by Activity

Activity	% Respondents
Full-time employment	61
Part-time employment	11
Employment and further study	10
Full-time further study	6
Other including travel, caring for someone or retired	6
Unemployed	5
Voluntary or unpaid work	1
Part-time further study	0
Unknown pattern of employment	0
Unknown pattern of further study	0

Note. Adapted from "Figure 1 - Graduate Outcomes by Activity," by HESA, 2024 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb268/figure-1>). CC BY 4.0 by Jisc.

Table 3. 2021–2022 UK Graduates' Main Reason for Taking Their Job

Reason	% Respondents
It fitted into my career plan / it was exactly the type of work I wanted	46
To gain and broaden my experience in order to get the type of job I really want	14
It was an opportunity to progress in the organisation / It was an opportunity to progress in the industry I am interested in	11
In order to earn a living	10
It was the best job offer I received / I did not receive any job offers	7
It was in the right location / It allowed me to work in the right location	4
To see if I would like the type of work it involved	4
The job was well-paid / It was well-paid	3
To work in my family business	1
In order to pay off debts	0

Note. Adapted from “Chart 13 - Graduates in UK Work by Main Reason for Taking the Job and Skill Group,” by HESA, 2024 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/chart-13>). CC BY 4.0 by Jisc.

Two questions can be considered to allow respondents to express opinions in the activity questions. Employed and self-employed graduates are asked for the main reason they decided to take their job. This is an optional question for the survey respondents. They can select from ten responses that give insight into whether their reasons were career-focused, pragmatic, or exploratory. The most popular response from those who graduated in 2021/22 was “It fitted into my career plan / it was exactly the type of work I wanted,” reported by 46% of respondents. Full responses from 2021/22 are in Table 3.

Graduates are also asked an optional question on whether the qualifications they have just completed were required to get the job. Responses here allow the graduates to reflect on whether they felt their qualifications and/or subjects were needed or advantageous in securing their jobs. Table 4 shows the 2021/22 responses. Just over a third of graduates (34%) confirmed that both the level and subject of qualification was a formal requirement. A further 25% said the qualification was not a formal requirement but gave them an advantage, with 25% saying that their qualification was not required to secure their job.

Respondents are then asked three optional questions under the heading “Reflection on activity to date,” which are worded slightly differently depending on their main activity. They are asked three questions on a five-point Likert scale, and these questions (Figure 1) allow the graduate to reflect on their current activity and the qualifications leading up to it. Note that Figure 1 provides an overview, and graduate reflections may vary by their main activity. Further breakdowns by activity are available on the HESA website (2024b). While the majority of graduates do reflect positively about their activities to date, there are a significant minority who are less content. This is most notable in relation to whether they are utilising what they learned in their current activity, with 21% of UK graduates disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement.

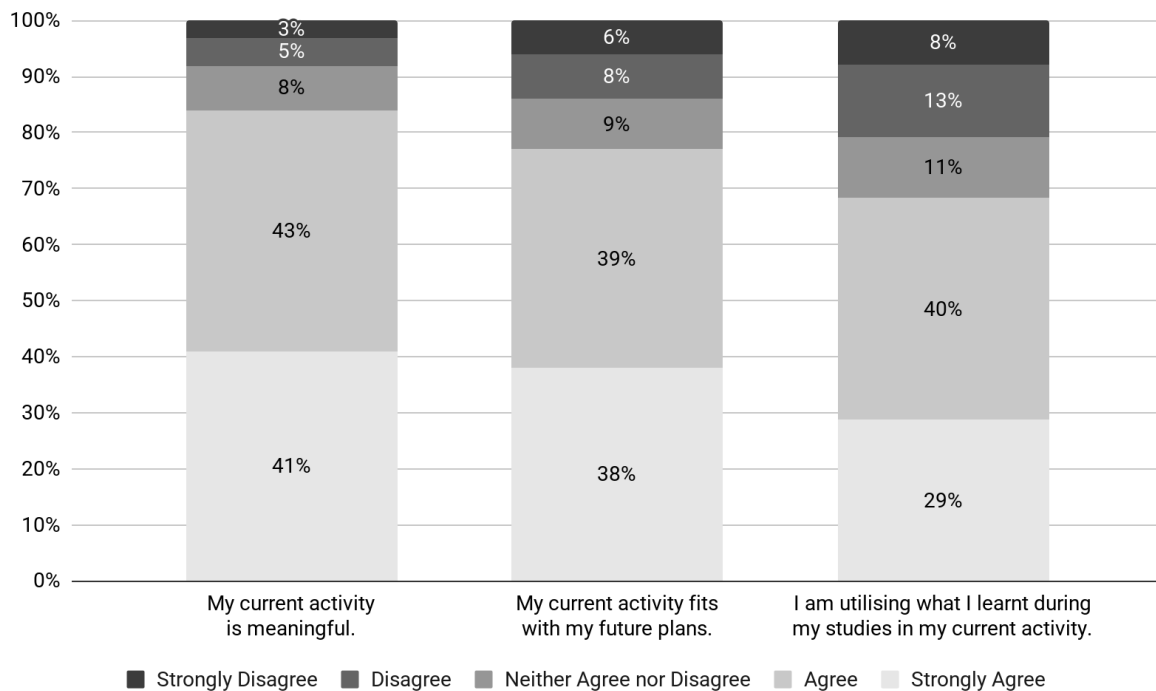
Four optional subjective well-being questions follow, as shown in Figure 2. These questions are clearly very personal and subjective in nature, touching on the graduates' state of mind and contentment in their current position and activity. The results show generally good levels of happiness, satisfaction, and feeling that what they do in life is worthwhile, but also high anxiety levels.

Table 4. Responses Provided by UK graduates in 2021/22 in Relation to Whether they Required their Qualification for Their Job

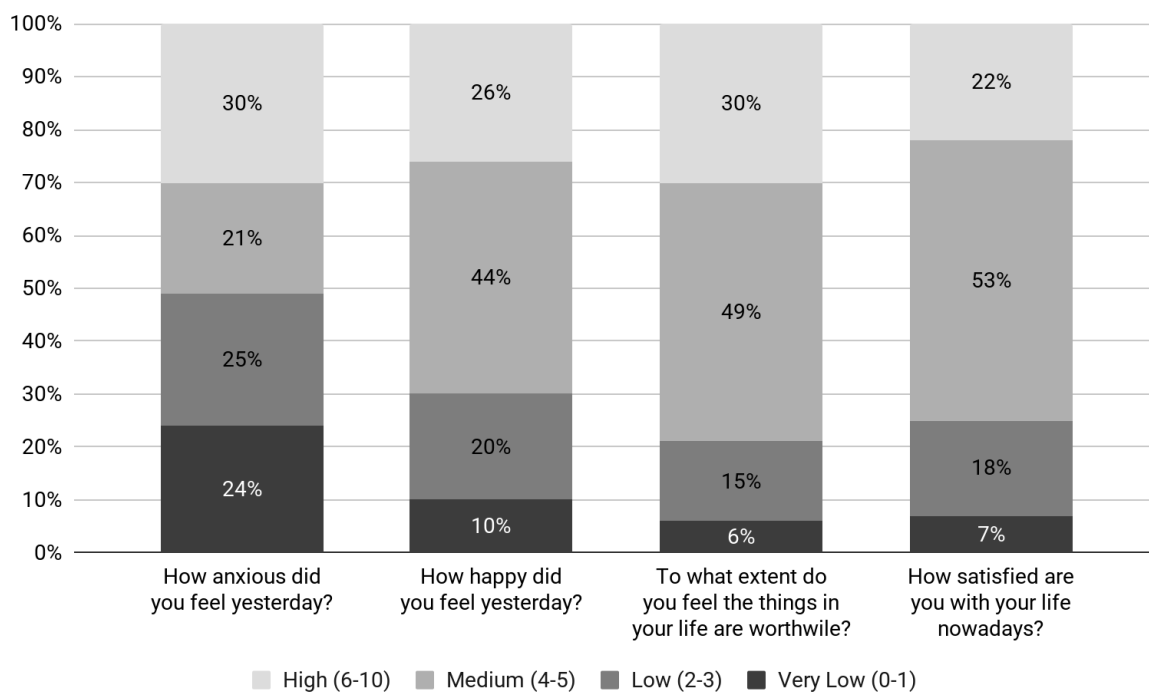
Qualification Required for The Job	% Respondents
Yes: both the level and subject of qualification was a formal requirement	33.6
Yes: while the qualification was not a formal requirement it did give me an advantage	25.3
No: the qualification was not required	24.9
Yes: the level of qualification was a formal requirement	10.5
Yes: the subject of the qualification was a formal requirement	4.6
Don't know	1.2

Note. Adapted from "Chart 14 - Graduates Working for an Employer in the UK by Qualification Required for the Job and Skill Group," by HESA, 2024 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/chart-14>). CC BY 4.0 by Jisc.

Figure 1. UK-GOS: Respondents' Reflections on Their Activities to Date



Note. Adapted from "Figure 17 - Graduate Reflections," by HESA, 2024 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb268/figure-17>). CC BY 4.0 by Jisc.

Figure 2. UK-GOS: Respondents' Reflections on Their Subjective Wellbeing

Note. Adapted from "Chart 10 - Graduates' Subjective Wellbeing by Activity," by HESA, 2024 (<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/chart-10>). CC BY 4.0 by Jisc.

Australia

Similar objective employment information is initially captured in Aus-GOS, focusing on whether the respondent worked in the last week, and if so, the nature of this work, whether they have been seeking work in the last four weeks, and whether they are available for work. Factual data on the hours worked is collected, and respondents are also asked whether they would prefer to work more hours and, if not, to select from a list of reasons to explain the number of hours they work. This list allows the respondent to identify factors that may be affecting their workforce participation, allowing a more nuanced picture of their broader activities to emerge and potentially helping to identify systemic barriers to workforce participation.

The main reasons for working in jobs that underutilise skills or education fall into two categories: labour market factors and personal factors. Among domestic undergraduate graduates, the most common labour market reason was that the job served as a career stepping stone (Table 5). This suggests that graduates are willing to accept jobs that temporarily underutilise their skills, expecting to move on to more suitable roles later. For personal factors, many graduates reported being satisfied with their current job, indicating that despite the underutilisation of their skills, the job met other important criteria and provided benefits unrelated to career progression. These trends were consistent across genders.

Table 5. Undergraduates' Main Reason for Working in a Job That Does Not Fully Utilise Skills and Education 2023

Reason	% Full-Time Employment	% Overall Employment
Personal Factors		
Studying	6.4	20.7
I'm satisfied with my current job	14.7	10.9
For financial reasons	8.2	5.5
Caring for children or family member	1.3	1.7
Travelling/gap year	1.0	1.3
Other personal factors	0.4	0.4
Subtotal	32.0	40.5
Labour Market Factors		
No suitable jobs in my area of expertise	7.2	8.5
No suitable jobs in my local area	6.0	6.7
Considered to be too young by employers	2.1	1.3
Considered to be too old by employers	0.5	0.4
Not enough work experience	9.8	9.9
No jobs with a suitable number of hours	0.6	1.1
Entry level job/career stepping stone	27.8	18.3
Other labour market factors	1.2	1.2
Subtotal	55.2	47.4
Other Factors	12.7	12.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Note. Adapted from "Table 15, Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey," by Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p.34, *2023 Graduate Outcomes Survey: National Report*. (https://qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023-gos-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=5925e306_2). Copyright by the Social Research Centre Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia.

Graduates are subsequently asked on a 5-point Likert scale about their agreement with a series of statements. These statements consider whether they needed their education, training, and knowledge in their job and whether they use their skills and abilities. Where respondents indicate that they feel they have more skills or education than needed for their current role, they are asked to reflect on the reasons for this, again incorporating factors such as caring duties, a lack of suitable jobs in their specific location or area of expertise, further study commitments, and a long-term health condition or disability, as outlined in Table 6. The questions also allow them to identify that this is a “career stepping stone” or to highlight that their work experience or residency status affects their ability to take a more senior or relevant role. This is an opportunity for reflection and a subjective assessment of their current career position.

Table 6. *Main Reason for Not Working More Hours, of Undergraduates Employed Part-Time by Preference for More Hours 2023 (% of those employed)*

Reason	Seeking More Hours	Not Seeking More Hours
Personal Factors		
I'm satisfied with the number of hours I work	0.0	34.9
Studying	18.2	38.8
Health issues	0.8	1.8
Caring responsibilities	4.2	10.2
Pursuing other interests	0.0	7.9
Subtotal	23.2	93.6
Labour Market Factors		
No suitable jobs in my area of expertise	9.5	0.7
No suitable jobs in my local area	4.7	0.3
Considered to be too young by employers	1.0	0.0
Considered to be too old by employers	0.8	0.0
No jobs with a suitable number of hours	4.7	0.2
No more hours available in current position	43.7	3.6
Subtotal	64.4	3.6
Other Factors	12.4	2.8
Total	100.0	100.0

Note. Adapted from “Table 2, Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey,” by Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p. 6, *2023 Graduate Outcomes Survey: National Report*. (https://qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023-gos-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=5925e306_2). Copyright by the Social Research Centre Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia.

Agreement with statements about the extent to which the graduates' skills are being utilised can be used to measure perceptions of overqualification. In 2023, 38% of graduates felt that their jobs did not fully utilise their skills. However, there are notable differences between those in part-time or casual roles and those in full-time positions. Graduates may be more willing to accept a temporary role for which they are overqualified. However, there are still a large number of graduates accepting permanent roles where they feel underutilised. Among full-time workers, only 27.8% reported that their jobs allowed them to fully utilise their skills and education, and of those, more than half attributed this to labour market factors.

Graduates were also asked to rate how well their degree prepared them for their current jobs. Overall, 74.6% reported that their degrees prepared them well or very well. However, the sense of preparedness varied significantly by degree type (see Table 7). For instance, health sciences degrees scored high on preparedness, with pharmacy topping the list at 92.8%. In contrast, creative arts degrees ranked the lowest, with only 61.2% of graduates feeling well-prepared for their jobs.

Similarly to UK-GOS, respondents are asked whether their qualification is a formal requirement for their role and whether it is important to have the qualification to be able to do the job. Participants are then asked to reflect further on the preparation they received from their HE provider for employment and/or further study, allowing them to provide clear

Table 7. *Domestic Undergraduates' Preparedness by study area. Domestic graduates reporting that their course prepared them well or very well for their current job by study area and study level, 2023 (% of those employed full time).*

Study Area	% Domestic Undergraduates
Creative arts	61.2
Agriculture and environmental studies	64.0
Science and mathematics	67.5
Architecture and built environment	73.4
Computing and information systems	74.3
Health services and support	77.1
Engineering	78.8
Medicine	81.3
Nursing	85.7
Pharmacy	92.8

Note. Adapted from "Table 18. Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey," by Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024, p. 38, *2023 Graduate Outcomes Survey: National Report*. (https://qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2023-gos-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=5925e306_2). Copyright by the Social Research Centre Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia.

feedback and encouraging further respondent reflection on the quality and nature of their course and overall support. Similar questions are included in UK-GOS but are part of the optional question bank.

Discussion

Understanding career success and support

Despite both countries collecting nuanced information about graduates and their outcomes, mainstream reporting frequently focuses on the number of graduates successfully applying for full-time traditional graduate roles in articles such as those from *Personnel Today* (Faragher, 2024) and *Bloomberg* (Kehnscherper, 2024). The proportion of graduates moving into full-time graduate-level roles after their course is perceived as an indicator of individual and institutional success and, thus, institutional reputation. This perception is fed by league table publications in the UK, where national newspapers collate data on student satisfaction, career outcomes, staff to student ratios, and more. Reducing these complex responses to headline statistics overlooks the many personal characteristics and factors affecting career journeys, as identified by social cognitive career theory. Background contextual influences such as an individual's economic background, alongside person inputs such as sex and gender, ethnicity, and disability, can create variety in individual understanding of career success and what a positive graduate outcome looks like. Career scholars and researchers recognise this (Heslin, 2005; Shockley et al., 2015), and in practice, career practitioners focus on supporting individuals to achieve positive outcomes for them personally. However, there is a need for the HE sector and providers, in both Australia and the UK, to work collaboratively on broadening student, graduate, and public understanding of the reality of non-linear careers and the multi-faceted nature of career success. This could be achieved through sharing a wider variety of career stories and integrating employability and career development into the curriculum across all course areas.

Such building of awareness and understanding needs to incorporate the many reasons people engage with HE through making better use of the comprehensive, subjective data available from UK-GOS and Aus-GOS. In both countries, career services are critical in supporting students' transition to the workforce and enhancing graduate employment outcomes, yet they remain chronically underfunded and under-resourced. Universities face increasing pressure to demonstrate the employability of their graduates (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017), but cost-efficiency agendas and governance models have led to significant cuts in support services, which are often outsourced or centralised (Connell, 2019; Croucher & Woelert, 2022). These measures undermine the delivery of the consistent, person-centred support essential for student success. This impact can be even greater for groups facing significant labour market disadvantages, including disabled graduates and those from low socioeconomic status or non-English speaking backgrounds, who can experience lower employment rates, skill-job mismatches, and reduced earnings (Baker et al., 2018). Precarious funding challenges exacerbate these issues, as career services rely heavily on insecure funding. This limits the capacity to attract and retain skilled practitioners while undermining service quality, staff well-being, and job security, ultimately hindering their ability to effectively meet the needs of students and industry.

Understanding environmental influences

Both UK-GOS and Aus-GOS recognise the contextual and environmental factors that align with social cognitive career theory through the inclusion of survey questions focusing on why graduates choose to take certain roles. In the UK graduates are able to identify whether they took a particular role because they were driven by a clear career aim (i.e., “It fitted into my career plan / it was exactly the type of work I wanted”) or whether their decision was more pragmatic (i.e., taking a role “In order to earn a living”). In Australia, Aus-GOS encourages respondents to reflect on the realistic considerations related to their workforce participation and to identify where wider contextual and environmental factors might be affecting this, e.g., caring duties or a lack of suitable jobs in their specific location. With 10% of UK graduates saying they took their job due to the need to earn a living and 15% of Australian undergraduates saying they are underemployed, the significance of these pragmatic considerations is clear. Including these subjective measures within each national survey adds to the overall understanding of whether the outcome is a “success” for the individual. This line of questioning increases our understanding of the cultural influences outlined in social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 2002), particularly the proximal environmental influences that may affect career decision-making. By asking graduates who feel under-employed to reflect on the reasons for this explicitly, the qualitative and subjective questions in the Australian survey, in particular, allow for analysis beyond binary consideration of employment and unemployment, into under-employment and the factors behind this.

Impacts on equity, diversity, and inclusion

Where pragmatic and financial reasons underpin career decision-making, there is a proven risk of getting stuck in that role, with a “scarring” effect on the individual’s career (Borland, 2020). Borland demonstrates that there can be long-term negative effects on career progression and well-being for those in this position and that students from under-represented groups are most affected. This could be exacerbated because students from low SES backgrounds typically underutilise university career services, which are critical for gaining labour market information and building essential career skills (Harvey et al., 2020; Karimshah et al., 2013). The impact of career-undermatching extends beyond professional stagnation, with significant implications for overall well-being (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

Both background contextual influences and personal inputs are identified as part of the cultural influences that indelibly shape a person’s sense of self-efficacy and their outcome expectations. Person inputs have also been shown to link to inequitable graduate outcomes (Bolton & Lewis, 2024; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Toogood, 2025). Quantitative employment data collection allows inequity to be identified, but arguably, the subjective and self-reported data allows for an initial deeper analysis into the barriers experienced. Such an analysis may justify further qualitative work to understand how to dismantle these barriers to support equity, diversity, and inclusion. Therefore, there is a clear need for career learning strategies that address underemployment and policy interventions that consider the evolving labour market for graduates, focusing on the student and graduate groups that have historically been the most vulnerable to scarring (Jackson & Li, 2022).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated the value of subjective measures in graduate career surveys. Highlighting that they add to the understanding of career “success” for individuals and support a broader understanding of the graduate labour market and institutional and national outcomes. However, it is also recognised that overly simplistic reporting risks limiting the use and understanding of these rich and nuanced datasets. It is therefore recommended that HE providers work individually and collectively as a sector to report on their graduate outcomes in ways that develop public understanding of the reality of non-linear careers and the risks of scarring.

At the national level, subjective measures can better support the understanding of progress towards equity, diversity, and inclusion in education and the labour market in the UK and Australia, which aligns with national policies. There is scope to use subjective measures in exploring graduate social mobility and outcome gaps; using UK-GOS and Aus-GOS outcomes beyond salary metrics would support a better understanding of these key topics. This would allow a better understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion in both countries and support the delivery of the aims and objectives of the Universities Accord in Australia (Department for Education, 2024) and the Office for Students’ student outcomes expectations in the UK (OfS, 2022).

This awareness-raising also needs to extend to in-curricular and extra-curricular work with students and graduates, led by careers and employability professionals, supported by all academic and professional services staff, and by wider institutional and national policy. In both the UK and Australia, some demographic groups have been identified as experiencing less positive graduate outcomes when outcomes are considered by ethnicity, sex and gender, disability, or SES background. Students from lower SES backgrounds have also been identified as less likely to engage with their university career services. This makes the case for integrating employability in the curriculum so that employability, career, and labour market information become structurally unavoidable in HE. It also highlights the need for well-resourced and supported professional careers teams who can design and deliver the expert careers education, information, advice, and guidance required to support inclusion and equity of outcomes.

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