

Exploring the relationship between provided curriculum and employer expectations

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Submitted to National College of Ireland: August 2025

Abstract

This study explores the work readiness (WR) of recent Human Resource (HR) graduates in Ireland, focusing on their perceptions of how effectively their Higher Education Institute (HEI) prepared them for full-time employment. Adopting an interpretivist, qualitative approach, data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews with graduates who had completed HR programmes within the past five years. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis identified five overarching themes: (1) misalignment between curriculum and workplace requirements, (2) the importance of HR work placement, (3) technical skills, (4) soft skills, and (5) recommendations for improvement.

Findings from this research reveal a clear discrepancy between the theory focused curriculum and the operational competencies demanded in entry-level HR roles. Graduates emphasised the value of work experience in building confidence, applying theory to practice, and developing both technical and soft skills. Those without placement opportunities reported feeling disadvantaged and found it challenging transitioning into full-time employment. A lack technical competencies was identified such as HR systems, and in soft skills including conflict resolution, emotional preparedness, and interview capabilities.

Participants recommended mandatory HR work experience, technical systems training, interview workshops, and conflict-resolution roleplay, alongside better preparation for the personal and professional transition into full-time work. The study concludes that implementing more opportunity to apply theory to practical solutions, and soft skills development into HR curriculums would better align graduate capabilities with employer expectations.

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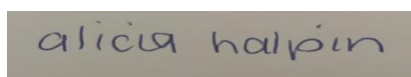
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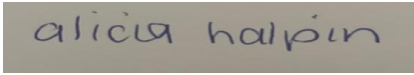
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Programme: MAHRMD1
Year: 1
Module: Dissertation
Lecturer: Corina Sheerin
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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend a thank you everyone who supported me in completing this dissertation.

First, I would like to express sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Corina Sheerin, for her continuous support and encouragement throughout this dissertation. Thank you for being so generous with your time and knowledge during this intense time, your guidance and feedback has been invaluable to this research.

I am forever grateful to my parents, Anne and Paul, and my entire family, for all your love, support and encouragement, both now and throughout my life. I wouldn't be where I am today without you, thank you for always pushing me to do my best.

Finally, I would like to thank my wonderful boyfriend, Evan, for the countless ways you have supported me throughout this process. From the countless hours of keeping me company to always uplifting and encouraging me.

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List of Acronyms

Work Readiness: WR

Human Resources: HR

Higher Education Institute: HEI

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research aims to explore the work readiness (WR) of recent Human Resource (HR) graduates and how effectively the curriculum provided by their Higher Education Institute (HEI) prepared them for full-time employment by examining their perspectives on their competencies. The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with an overview of the research topic background and main objectives of the study. This section will identify the research aims, objectives, and methodology used to conduct this research. This chapter will also provide the structure for this dissertation along with a summary of each chapter.

1.2 Background

The literature on graduate WR highlights its increase in importance in an ever evolving and competitive labour market. WR goes beyond academic achievement, encompassing technical skills, soft skills, personal attributes, and workplace behaviours. Although, there is no universally agreed definition of WR, and different perspectives between employers, graduates, and HEIs contribute to a misalignment between demonstrated and expected competencies (Chigbu and Nekhwevha, 2022).

Multiple frameworks attempt to conceptualise WR. Peersia *et al.* (2024) proposed a three-component framework that measured WR through skills, concept, and approach, recognising that both internal and external factors shaping WR. In contrast, Prikshat *et al.*'s (2019) Work-Readiness Integrated Competency Model (WRICM) focuses on measurable competencies as a competitive advantage, including intellectual, personality, meta-skills, and job-specific resources. The first model provides a broad, contextual perspective, and the second offers practical way to measure competencies.

Graduate competencies essential for WR include role specific technical skills, social skills such as communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution, and personal characteristics such as motivation, resilience, adaptability, and imitative. Research finds that soft skills, particularly communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and professionalism are valued alongside technical skills, especially in HR roles (Peersia, *et al.*, 2024). Practical experiences such as internships, allow practical application of theory and are proven to increase both technical capabilities and employability (Stallings, 2024).

Employer expectations extend beyond academic knowledge to a graduate's ability to adapt to organisational culture, show initiative, and adapt to new and evolving workplace. While technical skills can be taught in the role, soft skills are harder to develop, making them a critical factor in recruitment decisions (Stallings, 2024). Studies reveal that employers often perceive a lack of professionalism, relationship skills, written communication, highlighting a misalignment with graduates' self-assessments of their competencies (Stewart *et al.*, 2016)

Tomlinson and Anderson (2021) developed the theory of “signaling”, where WR is demonstrated through various forms of capital such as human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological. Work experience is a particularly strong signal, as it provides opportunities for skill development and demonstration, networking, and professional identity formation. However, the evolution of the HR sector challenges HEIs to keep curriculum aligned with employer needs (Stallings, 2024).

HEIs play an important role in preparing graduates for entering full-time employment. Elements such as active learning, sector specific guest speakers and information, and targeted career guidance can align competencies with employer expectations. While traditional curriculums focus on technical skills due to their ability to be tangibly measured through assessment, growing evidence supports introducing soft skills development. Updating curriculums to reflect the changes in competencies needed in the workplace is the most efficient way to improve graduate employability.

1.3 Rational

This research is driven by the need to understand graduate WR from their perspective, which is often overlooked in existing literature of this topic. Exploring graduates' perspectives of their skills, competencies, attributes and values developed by their higher education experience allows the findings to be used to provide practical recommendations to HEIs, employers and students. This research also addresses the misalignment between academic preparation and workplace expectancies which can negatively impact confidence, performance, employability and career success. By exploring these gaps and challenges, this research can contribute to improving graduate WR.

1.4 Aims

The aim of this research is to examine the WR of recent HR graduates, focusing on their perspective of transitioning from being a student into full-time employment. By evaluating how effectively the current curriculum in HEIs prepare graduates for full-time employment, this study identifies the discrepancies between the capabilities graduates demonstrate and employers consider necessary.

The first sub-aim is to identify the technical and soft skills, and competencies students develop throughout their higher education experience. The second sub-aim is to assess graduates' perceptions of how effectively they were prepared for full-time employment in the HR sector. The third sub-aim is to explore the discrepancies of capabilities developed through their academic study and those required in the workplace. The fourth sub-aim is to explore the perceived challenges graduates faced in their transition into full-time employment, including areas where they felt unprepared or lacking in competencies. The last sub-aim is to provide recommendations to HEIs and employers to increase graduate WR and to realign the competencies taught within the HR curriculum and those necessary in the workplace.

1.5 Research question

“Exploring the work readiness of recent Human Resource graduates and how effectively the curriculum provided by their Higher Education Institute prepared them for full-time employment”

1.6 Research design

A qualitative methodological approach was used to conduct this research as it allows for the exploration and understanding of a subject. This research focuses on the HR sector, specifically the perspective of recent graduates on their transition into full-time employment. The sample was chosen through purposive sampling and was comprised of individuals who graduated less than five years ago from an Irish HEI. This research faced a challenge recruiting participants as all participants are now in full-time employment and Microsoft Teams was chosen as a means to conveniently conduct interviews online. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants and analysed using Braun

and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis approach, resulting in five overarching themes to answer the research question.

1.7 Structure

Chapter 1 has presented an overview of the background on this research topic and an outline the rational, aims, research question and design, and structure of this dissertation.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review on existing literature of this research topic and highlights any gaps in the literature.

Chapter 3 presents the research question and aims. It also details the importance of this research.

Chapter 4 presents the methodological approach of this research. The research design is presented and related to the research aims, providing reasoning for adopting an inductive, qualitative approach frames in an interpretivist paradigm. The sample, research instrument and data analysis process are discussed in detail.

Chapter 5 presents the results of the research arising from the thematic analysis of data collected from eight semi-structured interviews. These findings are categorised a presented through five overarching themes.

Chapter 6 further discusses the findings from the thematic analysis in the context of broader existing literature on this research topic. It also details implications from the findings and outlines the strengths and limitations of this research.

Chapter 7 concludes the research, presenting how the study achieved its research aims and objectives as well as providing some recommendations for further study research on this topic.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlines the rational and aims of this research, as well as providing a background of the broader existing literature. It discusses the research question and design, including the

methodological approach used to complete this research. Finally, the chapters were briefly discussed, providing details of each one.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of the chapter is to present a broad overview of the existing research on the topic of graduate WR. This chapter will explore what WR is, graduate competencies, employer expectations, discrepancies in capabilities and the role of HEIs. It is necessary to review, explore and critically discuss existing research on this topic to identify any gaps in literature. In the context of WR within the HR sector, competency can be defined as meeting the demand of the context through a combination of skills, knowledge and attributes. They have become a tangible way to measure career success (Bogdány *et al.* 2023).

2.2 Defining Work Readiness (WR)

With the increased use of the digital workspace and how volatile the labour market has become, the term WR has become increasingly important. As a result, graduates are expected to be able to join the workforce with more than academic knowledge, they are expected to join with a wide range of skills and experiences (Adeosun and Adegbite, 2022).

The term WR lacks a universal agreement on what clear, measurable skills and experiences it encompasses. Defining this term will help close the gap between the needs of the employer and what graduates can provide and therefore improve the hiring processes, learning and development (Casner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006).

WR consists of several aspects such as soft skills like communication, adaptability, teamwork and cognitive and technical skills. To clarify this definition the perspectives of both the employer and the graduate need to be considered, and how they can be aligned to meet the demands of the labour market (Peersia *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, Tentama and Riskiyana (2020) define WR as the technical skill, knowledge and behaviour of an individual that make them successful in the workplace. Additionally, Symonds and O'Sullivan (2017) widen their definition to include more specific criteria such as career motivation and social skills.

Peersia *et al.*, (2024) proposed a model to conceptualise WR, which focuses on 3 main components of: (1) skill, (2) concept and (3) approach. The first component focuses on the skills that make a graduate work ready. They break down this first component into three

hierarchal levels of first, second and third-order skills. First-order skills are the broadest and most complex, including cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. Second-order skills are more specific sub-categories from the first-order skills, such as creative skills fall within the broader category of cognitive skills. Third-order skills are the simplest sub-category form, such as curiosity falling under creative skills and are considered to be indicators of WR. The second component focuses on external factors that influence WR, such as employers, the government, higher education institute curriculums and students, as it recognises that WR doesn't exist in isolation. Employer refers to the size and sector of the organisation, government refers to the policies for economic development, HEIs are responsible for aligning their curriculum with the competencies demanded by employers, and students refers to the personal attributes of the individual. The third component of this model focuses on individuals WR through the demand, equilibrium and supply approach. The demand approach is an organisations need for human capital that possesses their desired workplace behaviours. The equilibrium approach focuses on the view of the individual, it looks at internal factors, such as background and motivation and external factors such as the state of the economy and job availability. This concept means that WR is influenced by internal and external factors and can be developed through continuous learning. The supply approach views WR from the view of the individual and focuses on their behaviours and motivation to meet the needs of the labour market Peersia *et al.*, (2024). This uses a broader approach to defining skills and focuses on integrating external influences and individual attributes. It uses a hierarchal ranking of skills beginning with more abstract concepts before narrowing down into more definable skills, this hierarchal approach provides a structured way to categorise complex skills but may be described as too specific and detailed, ignoring how these skills interact with each other. The broad view of this model allows it to have multiple perspectives but may lack specificity. However, as it analyses its components separately it does not fully reflect the interconnection of real-life situations.

By contrast, the work-readiness integrated competency model (WRICM) conceptualises WR based on the resource based view theory which views HR as a competitive advantage. This model consists of four main dimensions: (1) intellectual, (2) personality, (3) meta-skills and (4) job-specific resources. Intellectual resources are the skills that are complex, such as critical thinking. Personality resources refer to personality attributes that are seen as indicators of career success. Meta-skills resources are referred to as indicators of employability. Job-specific resources are the minimum number of capabilities needed to

perform a role (Prikshat *et al.*, 2019) The WRICM has a narrower focus, mainly on competencies that create a competitive advantage and converts abstract skills into measurable skills. This gives it a stronger advantage in practical measurement of WR. The WRICM doesn't provide any context as it assumes all skills interact across all environments. However, this means there is no proper structure to link to broader elements like policy or curriculum.

These two models could be used together to complement what they are missing, the three-dimensional model constructed by Peersia *et al.* (2024) identifies which skills and conceptual factors to prioritise and the WRICM created by Prikshat *et al.* (2019) shows the reason for that focus and would tangible measure WR in graduates.

2.3 Graduate competencies

Graduate WR refers to all attributes and competencies that allow individuals to successfully gain employment and contribute to their workplace (Bogdány *et al.*, 2023). Symonds and O'Sullivan (2017) describe competencies that define if a graduate is work ready, these competencies are divided into groups which are: basic skills, job specific skills, social skills and personal characteristics. Basic skills refer to competencies learned in education such as numeracy, literacy, digital literacy, and active listening. Job specific skills are more technical and need specific knowledge, experience or training to perform. These skills differ between roles which can involve using specialised software or generating reports. Social skills can include how individuals communicate, negotiate, resolve conflicts, work as a part of a team, and show leadership. Finally, personal characteristics include attributes such as motivation, goal setting, self-esteem, self-regulation, and a positive attitude.

Research above agrees that soft skills and technical skills are important in determining WR in graduates. Communication is a key soft skill and refers to both written and verbal communication, presentation skills, negotiation and conflict resolution. Critical thinking and problem solving are also considered important competencies. Professionalism refers to how a graduate's engagement with their role, their attitude and ability to adapt to a new environment, their manners, and willingness to take on new tasks. Adaptability is demonstrated through their ability to adapt to a new organisation, respond to changes in their responsibilities and career, to show initiative and to acknowledge and learn from feedback. Arguably, personal qualities determine an individual's ability to demonstrate the above.

These qualities include goal setting, motivation, self-regulation, integrity, awareness, resilience, maturity and the ability to deal with stress. However, these competencies are more difficult to develop academically and are hard to tangibly measure (Stewart *et al.*, 2016).

Technical skills are an essential capability for graduates to possess; they can be defined as encompassing technical and role specific knowledge such as IT skills and data analysis. While soft skills are very emphasised in research post-Covid-19, it is important to recognise that technical skills are complementary to soft skills. While employers value soft skills, there is still a requirement to have technical skills to perform many entry level HR roles (Paadi, 2014).

Research conducted by (Charterina *et al.*, 2019), showed that participating in internships during their studies gave students a way to show that they had valuable competencies. Their research also found that leadership and behavioural competencies, which are considered highly valuable by employers, are developed more in-depth when theory is paired with practical experience and continuous learning. Similarly, Osmani *et al.* (2019) agree that pairing theory with practical experiences allows for a deeper understanding of the theory and an increase in confidence in their ability to demonstrate their ability to deal with real life situations. Charterina *et al.* (2019) note how universities cannot provide these competencies by themselves therefore, it is essential to collaborate with organisations to provide opportunities for relevant work experience.

2.4 Employer expectation

Employers often use WR as an indicator of a graduate's potential, job performance and career advancement (Caballero *et al.*, 2011). Employers prefer graduates who have a mixture of academic knowledge, skills and behaviours suitable for their organisations environment (Hager, 2006).

Additionally, Ressi and Shaw (2022) state that organisations look at a mixture of competencies to determine the WR of graduates including soft and technical skills. These findings support Symonds and O'Sullivan's (2017) view that soft and technical skills are defining factors in WR. According to Teng *et al.* (2019) research conducted in the UK found

that employers believed that there was a gap in skills, particularly soft skills, which made it more difficult for graduates to gain employment.

Unlike soft skills, technical skills can be taught and tangibly measured. These skills are knowledge based and can be sector specific to the organisation. Some organisations provide training for new employees on technical skills needed for their job (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021). Employers recognise that it is important to provide training to new employees however, to be successful at this training, employers expect graduates to possess certain capabilities to be able to participate, understand and learn from the training and implement this into their new responsibilities, such as critical thinking and initiative. Learning and development are seen as a crucial HR function within an organisation and employers typically provide onboarding training at the start of a new role and offer mentoring opportunities and learning and development opportunities throughout their role (Ressia and Shaw., 2022). Providing continuous learning and development enables organisations to ensure their employees are growing their technical capabilities at the same rate as the labour market is evolving and allows them to be better equipped to deal with challenges such as transitioning to remote working (Hamouche, 2023).

Employers consider whether a potential employee will fit into the culture of their organisation, a competency that extends beyond soft and technical skills. Organisations value individuals who can adapt and integrate into new professional environments as this is an effective way to build good relationships with co-workers, managers and clients (Tomlinson and Anderson, 2021). Employers often seek graduates who have the preferred soft skills over preferred technical skills as research has shown that it is easier to provide training for technical skills than to provide it for soft skills, this is because soft skills are often related to an individual's character (Paadi, 2014).

A study conducted by Charterina *et al.* (2019) found that general competencies such as attitudes and traits, were valued the most among managers involved in the recruitments of recent graduates. This research also showed that the size of a company may impact what competencies an organisation seeks in graduates. Small and medium sized organisations typically value general competencies and often rely solely on interviews or recommendations throughout the hiring process, whereas larger organisations typically include additional steps in the hiring process such as psychometric testing or specific knowledge tests. Bogdány *et al.*

(2023) introduced a new methodology to rank competencies required for HR roles. They combine analysing education requirements, job advertisements, and data from focus groups conducted with HR professionals. This analysis revealed that communication, complex problem solving and technical skills are considered as necessary skills required for the HR sector.

2.5 Skills gap and challenges

There is an evident imbalance between the skills that employers expect from graduates and those that graduates demonstrate. In particular graduates' lack of soft skills has become more apparent (Adrian, 2017). A survey conducted by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that employers reported the following: 43% of graduates lacked professionalism, 29% of graduates lacked soft skills and relationship building skills, 28% of graduates lacked written communication skills and 23% of graduates lacked critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Their findings highlight the misalignment between capabilities graduates demonstrate and those employers deem essential (Stewart *et al.*, 2016).

In research by Lisá *et al.* (2019) graduates appear to be confident in their competencies, as they rated their evaluations higher in 19 out of 32 skills, than those completed by their employer. These two contrasting views on the competencies of graduates suggest a lack of alignment between graduates' self-evaluation and an employer's perception of their WR, this discrepancy may potentially be caused by a lack of self-awareness.

In an ever-growing market of recent graduates who are similarly qualified, employers rely on more than just academic qualifications to determine WR, Tomlinson and Anderson (2021) named this process “signalling”. This theory suggests that employability is shown through multiple forms of key assets that provide benefits to the individual, gained through both formal and informal experiences. It describes five key assets: (1) human, (2) social, (3) cultural, (4) identity and (5) psychological capital. Human capital refers to technical skills, ability to apply academic knowledge in ways that will benefit the organisation and career building capabilities such as labour market information. The application of these skills is dependent on the alignment of graduate qualification and employer expectations however, this alignment requires the ability to navigate career opportunities, a skill that is uncommon among graduates. Social capital refers to the ability to network, socialise and build new

relationships, which is an essential skill in HR as networking often provides opportunities for career advancement. It includes formal networking, such as through official body memberships, conferences and online engagement, as well as informal networking such as connections achieved through work experience. Cultural capital refers to the ability to adapt to professional environments such as having cultural sensibility, professionalism in the workplace and organisational specific behaviours. Experience in professional environments through relevant work placement can help graduates understand the expectations of a HR professional, due to the disparity of relevant HR work experience among students, some graduates have less cultural capital than others which can negatively affect their chances of recruitment despite comparable academic experience. Identity capital refers to the creation of a professional identity and an employable narrative, these processes are influenced by both the graduates self-perception and employer expectations. This is reflected in creating a professional and academic narrative for CVs and interviews. Psychological capital refers to capabilities such as adaptability and resilience, needed for entering a competitive and evolving sector. These are essential for dealing with aspects of entry level HR roles such as job rotation, short-term contracts, generalist roles, dealing with rejection and adapting to the demands of the workplace. Combined, these capitals provide a framework for addressing HR “work readiness” and highlights that employability is a combination of academic knowledge, behaviours, and professional identities.

One “signal” of WR beyond academic qualification is work experience (Tomlinson and Anderson., 2021). It has been suggested that adding compulsory work experience to third level education would aid in aligning employer expectations and graduate capabilities (Lisá *et al.*, 2019). Work experience programmes are valuable as they introduce students to the workplace before they are expected to be completely work ready, this allows them to experience a professional environment, create new connections and build new skills, all of which are skills needed to be sufficiently work ready as a graduate (Chigbu and Nekhwevha, 2022). Charterina *et al.* (2019) focuses on the importance of adding transferable generic skills, like teamwork, oral fluency and continuous learning, to business school curriculums. They revealed that generic competencies related to an individual’s attitude and values are the most important to employers, specifically for recent graduates who may lack technical skills.

Bogdány *et al.* (2023) specifically states that their research aim is to close the gap between employers and universities due to the evolving HR profession in Hungary. They recognise

that the HR sector has evolved a lot in the last decade, leading to new complex elements of HR emerging. Universities struggle to update their curriculum as fast as the sector is evolving, leading to a gap in what competencies are provided to students and what employers see as necessary. They developed a methodology based on national guidelines, role analysis and focus interviews to determine HR competencies critical for HR graduates to possess and found that attitudes and values such as initiative, independence and problem solving were necessary. They suggested to utilise policy makers to ensure HR curriculums are kept updated and relevant to the sector.

2.6 Role of Higher Education Institutes

HEI's are seen as responsible for getting students ready to enter the volatile landscape of the employment sector (Tomlinson, 2017). If it is their responsibility to produce "work ready" graduates, it can be argued that these institutes contribute to the disparity between the competencies employers expect and those graduates demonstrate (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015). The pressure on HEI's to produce "work ready" graduates has resulted in employability becoming a key focus, leading them to promote their employment statistics (Ressia, and Shaw., 2022).

HEI's can implement active learning, collaboration, and career guidance to ensure alignment with employers' expectations. Active learning can be achieved through real life case studies and learning about new industry developments which will provide graduates with not only academic knowledge, but also with knowledge specific to their sector that will allow them to adapt with an ever-evolving industry. Collaboration can be incorporated into the curriculum through presentations, group projects, workshops and guest speakers from relevant sectors, this teaches valuable and transferable skills, such as how to work as part of a team, presentation and networking skills (Chigbu and Nekhwevha, 2022). Career guidance can improve a graduate's chance of employment, as it helps them to become aware of how different organisations work, their role requirements, and help them showcase their knowledge and skills to signal to the employer that they are ready to work (Tomlinson and Anderson., 2021).

HEI's that provide a more traditional curriculum typically focus on technical skills as these are easier to deliver in an academic setting and assess through assignments and exams. This

focus on technical skills can contribute to the disparity between employers' expectation and graduate competencies (Teng *et al.*, 2019). Similar to the UK study, a study in Asia also found a lack of soft skills among their graduates, resulting in universities integrating a greater focus on them into their curriculum (Teng *et al.*, 2019).

Chapter 3: Research Question

3.1 Research question

“Exploring the work readiness of recent Human Resource Irish graduates and how effectively the curriculum provided by their Higher Education Institute prepared them for full-time employment”

3.2 Question Outline

The aim of this research is to examine the WR of recent HR graduates, focusing on their perspective of transitioning from being a student into full-time employment. By evaluating how effectively the current curriculum in HEIs prepare graduates for full-time employment, this study identifies the discrepancies between the capabilities graduates demonstrate and employers consider necessary.

The first sub-aim is to identify the technical and soft skills, and competencies students develop throughout their higher education experience. The second sub-aim is to assess graduates' perceptions of how effectively they were prepared for full-time employment in the HR sector. The third sub-aim is to explore the discrepancies of capabilities developed through their academic study and those required in the workplace. The fourth sub-aim is to explore the perceived challenges graduates faced in their transition into full-time employment, including areas where they felt unprepared or lacking in competencies. The last sub-aim is to provide recommendations to HEIs and employers to increase graduate WR and to realign the competencies taught within the HR curriculum and those necessary in the workplace.

3.3 Objectives

Research objectives include:

- To examine the perceptions of recent HR graduates in Ireland regarding the technical and soft skills, competencies, and attributes developed through higher education.
- To explore how effectively recent graduates believe their academic experience prepared them for employment in the HR field, including challenges faced during the transition to the workplace.

- To identify gaps between the skills and competencies gained during higher education and those expected by employers, with the aim of informing recommendations for improving graduate work readiness.

3.4 Why this research is important

This research is important for many reasons. Firstly, it brings a new perspective to this research topic as most research focuses on the perspective of the employer. By focusing on the perspective of recent HR graduates it brings their perspective, voice and experiences into the conversation. Focusing on their perspective also allows this research to explore the challenges recent HR graduates face in their transition into full-time employment. Secondly, it addresses an evident discrepancy of the capabilities demonstrated by students and those necessary to the workplace. Identifying the capabilities that graduates feel less confident in can help fix this discrepancy and ensure graduates are equipped to deal with an evolving sector. Thirdly, the findings from this research can support curriculum design, career services, and employability statistics in HEIs, ensuring they remain relevant and up to date with the HR sector.

Fourthly, realigning these competencies can improve graduate confidence and increase employability by ensuring graduates are confident in skills required in the workplace. Lastly, ensuring that HR graduates are work ready benefits both employers and graduates. It allows employers access to human capital that will positively contribute to their organisation and increases graduate employability.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct research exploring the WR of recent HR graduates, focusing on their perspective. This chapter includes philosophical assumptions, research aims, motivation, approach, and design. It also discusses the research instrument, sample, pilot interview, data collection methods, and analysis, as well as study limitations and ethical considerations. This chapter is essential as it provides information on how the study was conducted and establishes credibility for the research.

4.2 Philosophical assumptions

The philosophical assumption of a piece of research forms the foundation of its beliefs and guides its design and methodology. Epistemology and ontology are the foundational concepts for philosophical assumptions. Epistemology focuses on how knowledge is gained, understood, and validated, whereas ontology focuses on what exists in the world and how it is understood (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The research onion outlines three philosophies which are, positivist, interpretivism, and pragmatism. Each philosophy can have an epistemological or an ontological view (Saunders, 2019). The positivism paradigm believes that knowledge should be viewed through measurement, analysis and facts rather than through assumptions. This paradigm is mostly used in quantitative research (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). The interpretivism paradigm uncovers the deeper meaning of knowledge and focuses on an individual's experience. This paradigm is mostly used in the qualitative or mixed methods research approach (Gunbayi, 2020). The pragmatic philosophy focuses on the practicality of knowledge and aims to address real world problems. This philosophy relies on context, as it recognises that solutions need to be specific to each situation. This reliance means that this paradigm is used in research that involves close engagement with the beneficiaries of the research (Allemang *et al.*, 2022).

Kircher and Zipp (2022) used an interpretive philosophical assumption when aiming to study the perception of employability skills in South Africa as they wanted to qualitatively explore the perception and experiences of graduates instead of measuring their employability in a quantitative way. This paper will use an interpretive approach as it aims to qualitatively explore the relationship between the curriculum provided to current HR students and its

effectiveness in preparing graduates for starting full-time employment, and the interpretivist approach is most appropriate for this research method. Using an interpretivist method allows this research to gain the perspective of a small sample study using interviews.

4.3 Research aims

The primary aim of this research is to explore the WR of recent HR graduates in Ireland, focusing on their perspective on transitioning from their studies into full-time employment. By assessing how HEI's prepare graduates for the workplace, we can better understand how academic studies translate into employable skills which are needed for graduate success. Graduate employability is based on their WR therefore, their career success can be improved by identifying areas where graduates feel prepared or underprepared, (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015).

The sub-aims of this research also include identifying, based on the perception of recent Irish graduates, the technical and soft skills, competencies and attributes developed through academic programs at HEI's. This sub-aim is inspired by a study conducted by Mansour and Dean (2016), in which they focused on the technical and soft skills required to be deemed employable, through the perception of employers and faculty. Most research in this area is from the employer's perspective, this study is important as it focuses on the perspective of the graduate and will allow them to express their feelings, thoughts, opinions, and perspectives which is often overlooked in the current literature in this field.

A second sub-aim of this research is to explore graduates' perception of how effectively their higher education experience has prepared them for employment in the HR industry. A study conducted by Donald *et al.*, (2018) showed the importance of evaluating the experience of higher education when exploring the relationship between graduates and employability. Evaluating the curriculum given to students can determine what competencies graduates lack. This highlights that employability extends beyond gaining employment after graduation, it also includes the experience of the education received as this plays a large role in influencing the employability of a graduate.

The third sub-aim of this research is to identify any discrepancies between competencies gained during studies and those expected in the workplace. Current literature exploring the mismatch between individuals and organisations often focus on the cost associated with this

misalignment (McGuinness and Ortiz, 2016). This suggests that the current literature may overlook the underlying cause of this discrepancy. This research hopes to aid in the alignment of these competencies by acknowledging these discrepancies and providing proactive solutions as this will help to improve graduate employment.

The fourth sub-aim is to investigate any perceived challenges faced by graduates in their current roles, after their completion of their studies, including areas where graduates feel underprepared. Inspiration for this focus was taken from a study conducted by García-Aracil *et al.*, (2021), in Portugal, in which 641 students were surveyed about their experience in transitioning into working after their higher education experience. Findings from this research can be used to inform career services, academic advisors and course coordinators on how to better support student transitions from classroom learning to a professional environment.

The final sub-aim of this research was to provide recommendations for HEIs and HR professionals on how to enhance graduate WR. Ireland's education sector is constantly evolving to meet the demands of our labour market, therefore it is increasingly important for HEIs to evolve their curriculums to stay aligned with what competencies employers are seeking. By identifying the misalignment between skills graduates develop through their curriculum and those required by employers, this research can help support HEIs and influence how their curriculums are designed so they can remain efficient and relevant, especially within the HR field (Osmani *et al.*, 2019).

4.4 Research approach

The two main logical approaches used to conduct research are inductive and deductive. The inductive approach focuses on exploring and developing theories, it is known as a bottom-up approach as it focuses on gathering data first and then analysing it to find emerging themes and is most commonly used in qualitative research (Woo *et al.*, 2017). The deductive approach focuses on testing an existing theory and is known as a top-down approach as it uses data as a means to prove or reject a theory and is most commonly used in quantitative research (Kumar, 2024). A study conducted by Mansour and Dean (2016), used an inductive approach to examine employability skills through the perception of employers and faculty as it aimed to understand their perspective and build theories based on the collected data instead of starting from a pre-determined idea. As this study aims to examine the same subject

through a different perspective, the research conducted in this paper is of an inductive nature as it explores the perception of HR graduates and aims to understand their experience of moving from their studies to full-time employment, instead of starting from a fixed hypothesis.

Research can be conducted using three methodological approaches, the qualitative, the quantitative or a mixed methods approach. A qualitative approach to research is used when the research wants to explore and understand behaviours, thoughts, feelings and experiences, as this data cannot be measured in a statistical way. This method often uses the research instrument of interviews or focus groups. Qualitative analysis offers a deeper understanding of a topic, however, due to the typically small research sample, it is often specific to a certain situation and hard to generalise (Aspers and Corte, 2019). The quantitative approach uses numerical values to measure data. This approach uses research instruments like surveys and is useful to look for trends and answer questions based on facts and numbers. This approach produces measurable data however, it can lack context on the research topic (Ghanad, 2023). The mixed methods approach uses both qualitative and quantitative analysis in the same research. Using a mixed method approach to analysing data can help get a deeper understanding of the research topic and mixes the strengths of quantitative and qualitative analysis, however it can be a complex process and require a large investment of time (Taherdoost, 2022). A study conducted by Gurung, *et al.* (2023) explored the employability of undergraduate's business programmes using a qualitative approach as this is an appropriate method for exploring and gaining a perspective on a topic. This research has a similar aim, to explore the employability of a specific sector of graduates therefore, it will use a qualitative approach as this approach will allow for a deeper understanding of the perspective of the participants to understand how work ready they are.

4.5 Research design

This research used a qualitative method approach to collect data and explore the extent to which graduates are ready for work. Questionnaires were considered to be used as the data collection tool for this research, as they are an efficient way to gather primary data while remaining low cost and anonymous. However, surveys come with disadvantages, such as the possibility that the participant will not return them or fill them out incorrectly. Additionally, surveys do not allow for much elaboration, deviance from the pre-determined questions or for

the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of an individual's perspective (Dalati and Gómez, 2018). Interviews are an effective way to gather information for a qualitative study, conducting interviews allows for the participant to share their thoughts and opinions on the research topic. This study used semi-structured questions during the interviews to gain the perspective of the participant. Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews provide more freedom which allows for a better flow of conversation and allows participants the opportunity for reflection, to go in depth with their answers and justify their point of view (Bolderston, 2012). However, they still provide a loose structure to the interview to keep the participant talking about the research topic and to enable the interviewer to collect their required data (Kircher and Zipp, 2022). Using interviews allowed participants to share their opinions and experiences of their time and transition from their studies to working in their current role. All interviews were anonymised, to eliminate the risk of participants being identified by their responses, allowing them to speak openly and honestly (*Saunders et al.*, 2015).

4.6 Research instrument

Data collection was conducted through eight semi-structured interviews, lasting between 25 and 35 minutes each. Approximately 16 questions were asked per interview, this number varied as using semi-structured interviews allows for deviation from pre-determined questions. The interviews were conducted online, through Microsoft Teams, where they were visually recorded, audio recorded, and transcribed. Microsoft Teams was selected to conduct the interviews as it enabled them to take place online, offering convenience for both parties, and it allowed convenient recording and transcription of the interviews. Recordings were reviewed after the interview was complete to ensure the data was accurate. Handwritten field notes were taken during the interview to note any changes to the pre-determined questions and to record any relevant body language.

4.7 Participant sample

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby the sample pool was selected by the researcher, instead of randomly selecting participants due to the specific nature of this research (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). The participants were selected based on the course they graduated from and the role that they currently work in. Participants were selected on the

inclusion criteria of being over 18, having graduated from a human resource program at an Irish Higher Education Institute in the last 5 years, and now currently working in a Human Resource role.

All participants were provided with a participant information sheet and an interview consent form, see appendix A and B. The information sheet includes information about what the aims and objectives of this research, why it is important and how the interviews would be conducted. This ensures participants have a clear understanding of the study and what their involvement would entail. The interview consent form confirmed that all participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study anytime without consequence. It also confirmed that participants were comfortable with the interview being visually and audio recorded, and that all data would be anonymised to protect their identity. Providing these documents established trust between the researcher and the participants, which is essential for qualitative data where personal experiences are being shared.

A semi-structured interview process, with open ended questions, was used during this research with the aim to explore graduates' perceptions of their level of WR. These questions were used to attempt to answer two main questions in this research of how HR graduates perceive their level of WR and what discrepancies, if any, exist between the curriculum provided and employer expectations. The interview questions included five main themes: (1) transition into the workplace, (2) application of HR education, (3) development post-graduation, (4) self-assessed work readiness, (5) employer expectations. A full list of interview questions used can be seen in appendix C.

4.8 Pilot interview

Before conducting the interviews for this research, two pilot interviews were carried out. The aim of these pilot interviews was to test if the interview questions were understandable and to observe how the interview would flow and if they would prompt the participant to provide data relevant to the research topic. The feedback from both interviews was used in defining the final version of the interview questions, however it was not included in the final analysis.

The pilot interviews helped identify what questions needed to be modified. For example, one amendment arising from the pilot interviews led to the change of the question "How would you define work readiness in terms of human resources?" to the more specific question of "In

your opinion, what skills should a work ready HR graduate have?”. This rewording allowed for clearer and more specific responses as the focus of the question was placed on specific expectations instead of broad definitions. The change also gave participants the chance to draw from their specific experience in their roles, making their answers more relevant. The pilot interviews also identified that the initially estimated duration of 45 minutes to an hour was too long as both interviews finished before the set time was up, this led to the estimated time being changed to 25 – 35 minutes in the participant information form.

4.9 Data processing

Once the data was collected from the interviews, it went through a series of steps to prepare it for analysis. After the interview, the transcriptions were downloaded from Microsoft Teams and placed onto an external hard drive. The transcripts were reviewed to ensure they were accurate by cross-checking them with the audio recording and any errors were corrected. Once the transcriptions were reviewed, they were then cleaned by anonymising all identifiable information, example provided in appendix E. Participant’s names were removed, and the transcripts were labelled with a unique identifier, such as “Participant 1”. The anonymised transcripts were organised into a Microsoft Word document and then reviewed multiple times to develop an understanding of the data. Initial notes and open coding were then used to identify any emerging themes and areas of interest.

4.10 Data analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, in which similar patterns were identified. The thematic analysis approach is the process of data familiarization, coding, code checking, theme development, theme checking and theme naming (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Following the data processing stage, the anonymised transcripts were coded line by line in Microsoft Word using a thematic analysis approach, resulting in codes such as “too operational”, “lack of HR system experience”, “unrealistic expectation” and “lack of confidence”. Once the codes were generated for each of the transcripts, they were compared to see if any codes were repeated and repeated codes were grouped together. Emerging themes were identified from the repeated codes categorised in Microsoft Word. Each time the

data was reviewed, or a new step was completed it was moved to a new Microsoft word sheet to ensure the previous data could be revisited. Both open and axial coding was used in this process to identify initial ideas and group themes. The groups from this process were analysed to find the over-arching themes and were then compared to the existing literature and related to the research question. Bree and Gallagher (2016) demonstrate how to conduct a thematic analysis on Microsoft Word, as using dedicated analysis programmes such as NVivo require a commitment of time and a subscription to use.

4.11 Limitations

The first limitation was the sample size of the research, although the sample size is small it is robust and working with a small sample size allows for a deeper relationship with the participants and a deeper understanding of their experiences (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Another limitation was the challenge of gaining access to graduates who met the inclusion criteria to conduct this research, as this research needed graduates from a specific course who entered specific roles, having these requirements narrowed down the pool of potential participants. Another limitation of this study was the time constraint for conducting interviews, as all participants work full-time the researcher offered times outside of typical working hours. Although this study was undertaken in an Irish context due to cost constraints, the findings have important implications for Human resources more broadly. Although this research has limitations, it does not compromise the strengths and relevance of this research.

4.12 Ethics

Ethical principles are important in research as they help guide the research and ensure the research is safe to participate in (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). To ensure the ethics of the study was taken into consideration an ethical proposal was submitted and approved by the National College of Ireland before any participants were contacted. Once participants were contacted, a participant information sheet and consent form, see appendix A and B, were provided to inform interviewees of the purpose of the study and to get their consent before the interview. They were informed that all participation was voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw for any reason and without any consequences. They were informed that all personal information, and identifiable characteristics, such as their name, the higher education institute they graduated from, or their current workplace, would be kept confidential and changed in

the presented thesis. They were also informed that all signed documents, collected data and notes taken by the interviewer during the interview will be kept confidential in a password protected folder on the researcher's laptop until the thesis is completed. Then it will be stored in a safe, offline place for another two years, then deleted.

4.13 Conclusion

A qualitative method has been used to collect data consisting of the perspectives and experiences of recent HR graduates who were selected through purposive sampling. This has been collected through eight semi-structured interviews. Interview data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis approach. The themes generated from this analysis will be discussed in Chapter 5, Results.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from a thematic analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with recent HR graduates. The purpose of this study was to explore the “work readiness” of recent HR graduates in Ireland, focusing on their perspective of transitioning from their studies to full-time employment. This was explored using the following sub-questions:

- How do recent HR graduates perceive their technical skills, soft skills, competencies and attributes developed during their higher education experience?
- How effective do recent HR graduates perceive their higher education experience in preparing them for employment?
- How well are the skills and competencies developed by recent HR graduates during their higher education experience aligned with those expected from employers?

Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method of thematic analysis, eight initial themes emerged. They were re-examined to identify overlap between subthemes, such as social development and soft skills, which were then combined into one theme, an extract of the coding process is shown in appendix D. This process allowed the eight initial themes to be examined in more depth and were then combined into five overarching themes, an overview of the themes are shown in figure 1. The five overarching themes are: (1) the mismatch between curriculum and workplace, (2) importance of HR work placement, (3) technical skills, (4) soft skills, (5) recommendations. Each theme is discussed below, supported by participant quotes.

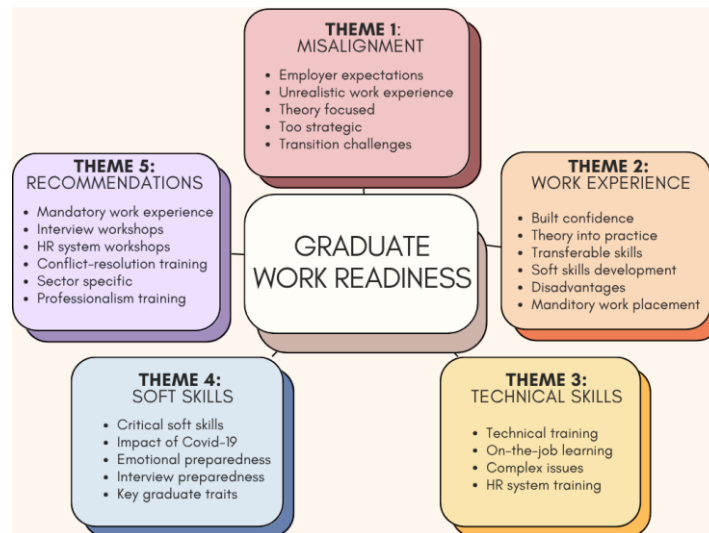


Figure 1. Themes and Subthemes of WR

5.2 Theme 1 – Misalignment

Theme 1 explores the alignment between the current HR higher education curriculum and the expectations of employers in the workplace. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are: theory focused, too strategic, transition challenges, employer expectations, and unrealistic work experience.

A dominant theme across all participants was the disconnect between their academic studies and the reality of entry level HR roles. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of focus given to hands-on technical skills within their curriculum, stating that entry level HR roles mainly focus on operational day-to-day technical tasks such as using HR systems like Workday or HRIS and dealing with admin tasks such as keeping data up to date or dealing with contracts.

Some modules such as International HRM, Sustainability modules and Strategic Management were described as “too strategic” for the operational nature of entry level HR roles performed by recent graduates, which typically include tasks such as onboarding, handling confidential information and managing employee queries. When asked about what modules they have drawn on in their current role, participant 8 stated “It could be more of an operations or administrative kind of role, so I suppose the strategic side of things maybe comes further down the line”. This statement acknowledges the delayed application of modules, further suggesting the gap between curriculum and capabilities needed for recent graduates. Their

use of “further down the line” implies that strategic roles are a long term goal and is in line with common career trajectory where strategic roles come with experience and seniority.

Participants described challenges they faced while transitioning from being a student to working full-time and many felt the experience had a steep learning curve, which suggests that recent graduates are feeling unprepared to enter the workplace. A reoccurring theme was that graduates felt employers wanted an unrealistic amount of experience for the grade of the role. Participant 1 observed “I feel like employers are looking for more so hands-on experience”. Participants felt that they were expected to have knowledge on technical elements of their role such as using HR systems and policies, areas they felt they were not exposed to enough in their studies. Participant 1 emphasised this by stating “Graduates are going in with just theory experience instead of practical experience and I feel like they miss out a lot because employers are looking for knowledge-based experience, like hands on experience, being able to use the different systems”. This suggests a perceived misalignment between the focus of third level curriculum and competencies expected in the workplace.

This theme highlights a clear misalignment between the curriculum provided in HR higher education and the competencies needed in entry level HR jobs. Participants reported feeling underprepared for aspects of their roles, due to the focus of their curriculum being mainly academic.

5.3 Theme 2 – Work placement

Theme 2 explores the importance of HR related work placement within the curriculum and how they improve graduates “work readiness”. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are built confidence, theory into practice, transferable skills, soft skill development, disadvantaged and mandatory work placement.

Graduates who participated in work placement within their higher education experience have said it gave them an advantage to entering the workplace by increasing their confidence and helped them transition into full-time roles. Participant 7 stated that “I think the internship was the best kind of jump into the working world because you weren't kind of expected to know everything yet”. This quote suggests that HR work placement provides a low-pressure environment where individuals are encouraged to learn, unlike the higher pressure environment of a new role where they are expected to have the required skills.

Participants expressed that completing HR work placement as part of their curriculum helped them to reinforce their learned theory through real life experiences, this reinforced their knowledge and improves their understanding of HR. It is also important to note that it was mentioned multiple times that skills learned in work outside of HR such as in part-time jobs while in college helped to build transferable skills that were not HR specific but that were of benefit when starting full-time employment. Participant 5 stated that when asked about the importance of soft skills in the workplace “I think soft skills which are gained through other places of work would help you a lot as well”. Soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and teamwork were seen as the biggest transferable skill gained through non-HR work. This idea also brings up the possibility that “work readiness” is not entirely based on HR training but on the combination of HR training and other work experience.

Those who did not participate in HR work placement felt they were at a disadvantage entering full-time employment due to a lack of practical experience. Participant 7 stated that “If you're coming from a degree that doesn't offer that work placement, I think you might be at a little bit of a disadvantage”. This opinion further reinforces the perceived value of work experience and also suggests that there is a disparity between degrees that offer the opportunity of HR work placement and those who do not, which may affect graduate “work readiness”. Several interview participants suggested to make a relevant HR work placement mandatory in every higher education HR program, this recommendation is explored further in theme 5.

This theme highlights the importance of work experience in making a student “work ready”. Participants who completed HR work placement as a part of their studies reported feeling more confident and a smoother transition into working full-time. This contrasts with students who didn't complete HR work placement as they reported feeling less confident and found it difficult to apply theory into practice when entering the workplace. This suggests that “work readiness” is not just developed by academic experience, but also by practical experience.

5.4 Theme 3 – Technical skills

Theme 3 reflects the misalignment of employers' expectations and technical skills provided by the curriculum. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are: technical training, on-the-job learning, complex issues, and. HR systems training.

Graduates feel that there is an expectation for them to have technical experience when entering the workplace. Participant 1 stated “Especially HR graduates, employers are looking for you to have familiarity with those systems”. However, when questioned on their confidence of technical skills learned from their curriculum they responded that they felt they lacked skills in Microsoft Excel, HR systems and handling confidential data.

Participants noted learning these skills mentioned above during employment instead of through their curriculum. This reflects a lack of focus on technical training within the curriculum provided to students. When asked if they had to learn anything not provided to them in their studies, participant 6 stated

“In the first job I had, they didn't really have their own HR system or an application that they used, so I was using Excel spreadsheets. My Excel spreadsheet skills got better there. In this job they have some HR systems which I'm learning to use”.

This theme highlights the lack of technical capacities demonstrated by graduates in entry level HR jobs. Participants revealed that they had limited knowledge in technical competencies such as using HR systems from their curriculum, this limited knowledge made them feel unprepared and resulted in them learning these skills while in employment. These findings present a need to incorporate more technical skill training into their curriculum. Participants recommended introducing workshops on these topics, this recommendation is explored further in theme 5.

5.5 Theme 4 – Soft skills

Theme 4 looks at the development of soft skills, specifically those essential to the role of HR in the workplace. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are critical soft skills, impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic, emotional preparedness, interview preparedness, and key graduate traits.

Soft skills such as communication, empathy, conflict-resolution and team-work were mentioned the most when questioned about what soft skills were essential to the role of HR in the workplace. When asked the above question, participant 5 stated that “Teamwork is really important, like how to communicate in a team. We did a lot of group projects in college, and I'd say that definitely contributed to my skills to working in a team now”. This demonstrates how academic experience, such as group presentations, can impact the development of social skills needed in a full-time work environment. It also shows that some skills learned through their higher education can be directly applied to the workplace, helping graduates feel more “work ready”. When questioned about what soft skills are essential, participant 6 stated

“I think communication will be a big one, just being able to get your points across and being able to get along with everyone. Obviously having empathy will be a good thing in that situation too, all the times you could be dealing with someone who is on compassion leave and they and they're talking to you about it, you need to have empathy for them.”

Participants said that they felt hindered in developing these skills as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic happening during their higher education experience. Many felt that the move from in-person to online isolated them from their peers and delayed the development of their social skills. When remembering their early years in college, participant 2 stated that “I was in my first year of college during the Covid-19 Pandemic, I feel like missed out on a lot of like the social interactions”. The transition away from in-person learning also hindered students ability to form new relationships, which is an important social skill for entering a new environment, such as full-time employment.

However, despite the negative effects of Covid-19 Pandemic, some participants highlighted a benefit of the shift from in-person to online, explaining that it mirrors the environment of many workplaces and provided them with valuable experience in online communication. This transition also improved graduates' ability to adapt to challenges in the workplace. When questioned about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic during their education, participant 6 stated

“I do think it helped in terms of, it got everyone more used to online interviews and preparing themselves and getting themselves set up on, let's say, Microsoft Teams, for example. Offices have now implemented that kind of system themselves, because obviously working from home is a lot more prominent these days. It helped in that aspect because now I'm more used to communicating with people solely online because they might be working in America or the UK and the only thing I have to go off is their face in a box”

Graduates admitted they felt unprepared to deal with emotionally complex situation in the workplace, such as conflict-resolution or grievances. When questioned on what aspects of their role they felt less comfortable with when they graduated, participant 7 stated “Definitely how to deal with a grievance or a disciplinary. I feel like the day-to-day stuff isn't really taught to you in a way of how to deal with like a very big issue that could be complicated or emotional”. This quote suggests that although theory on how to deal with emotionally complicated situations is provided in the curriculum, there is insufficient focus on practically implementing the theory.

Participants also felt that they were not prepared enough for interviews, both as job applicants and as HR professionals conducting interviews. Some participants recommended introducing interview workshops to develop competence in participating in interviews and conducting interviews. The recommendation of participating in and conducting interviews shows that graduates realise that these skills have multiple applications in their HR careers. When questioned on interview skills, participant 4 stated that “Maybe we could have been trained a little bit more in how to conduct interviews”. When questioned about parts of their role they felt they were not confident in, participant 8 stated

“Like doing interviews and different things with different managers. If we had a more of interview skill workshops within college, I think that actually would have helped, like starting up into a career. I know a lot of times when you're starting off in HR, I suppose you need to have that experience and I think to do interview skills workshops as someone that would be on the other end. I know we did workshops for ourselves doing the interviews for the different placements and different things but, to give you kind of opportunity to be on the other end and be the one asking the questions, I think that's something that would have been good. Now when I first started off in the career

and just because I suppose we ourselves we hire apprenticeships apprentices, a lot of the time they will be quite younger, so to have someone around their own age interviewing them might be more comfortable rather than having someone that's more senior”.

Graduates suggested that being “work ready” isn’t necessarily about possessing technical knowledge and capabilities, but more about possessing key attitude traits. Upon reflection of their career so far, they deemed self-motivation, willingness to learn, ability to be outgoing and adaptability to be the traits necessary to be a successful HR graduate. When asked to reflect on the key skills needed to be a “work ready” HR graduate, participant 3 stated

“I would say the, the willingness to learn is, is the major one. You know if someone has a has a good attitude and is willing to learn and try to pick things up as quickly as possible and try and be a sponge for the knowledge that you're kind of going into a workplace with”.

Participants admit to feeling unprepared due to limitations caused by Covid-19 Pandemic in their higher education experience. Additionally, they admit to feeling unprepared to being interviewed and conducting interviews. These findings suggest a lack of focus on soft skills that could potentially be improved with workshops, this idea is expanded on in theme 5. Overall, this theme highlights the importance of traits beyond skills and knowledge and suggests that the curriculum in third level education should include supports to prepare student for the social and behavioural changes that happen in the transition into full-time employment.

5.6 Theme 5 – Recommendations

Theme 5 presents the participant recommendations to improve HR graduate “work readiness”. The sub-themes extracted from this theme are: mandatory work experience, interview workshops, HR system workshops, conflict-resolution training, sector specific information and professionalism training.

A common recommendation was to make a HR work placement mandatory in all higher education institutes. The below quote shows that graduates have a perception that employers

prioritise applicants who have hands-on experience from HR work placement over theory and demonstrates how students that graduated from a degree without the opportunity to complete HR work placement were at a disadvantage. When questioned about how to improve the curriculum provided for students, participant 1 discussed the following

“I feel like internships should be mandatory because it does help in the sense that you know what to expect going into the workforce. But I feel like a lot of HR graduates don't have that experience, so they're inexperienced. They're going in with just theory experience instead of practical experience and I feel like they miss out a lot because employers are looking for knowledge-based experience, like hands on experience, being able to use the different systems. I feel like they're kind of at a disadvantage”.

Another common recommendation from participants was to add recruitment workshops to increase interview skills. This addition to curriculum would improve graduate confidence during the hiring process and therefore would improve their “work readiness”. When asked to reflect on how the current curriculum could improve, participant 8 suggested “If we had a more of interview skill workshops within college, I think that actually would have helped loads for ourselves, like starting up into a career”. And “I know we did workshops for ourselves doing the interviews for the different placements and different things but, to give you kind of opportunity to be on the other end and be the one asking the questions, I think that's something that would have been good”

Graduates also recommended the addition of workshops or labs to learn how to use HR systems. This recommendation reflects the need to introduce practical skills into a theory dominated curriculum. The introduction of labs or workshops would provide a structured way to build up the technical competency. Additionally, including HR systems would better align the skills taught with the competencies needed in the workplace. The quote below compares a HR degree to a science degree, it highlights the inequality to technical training HR students are potentially lacking. When asked about how to improve the curriculum for HR students, participant 1 suggested

“I would say also providing like hands on training and maybe HR labs because if you look at like biomedical sciences students, they have a lab in dealing with different scientific things and they're able to help get hands on experience. But we don't get that

experience, we get the theory side of things. So I think having IT labs that have HR systems and having lecturers that are able to teach that would further improve our experience”

It was also suggested to add roleplay to theory about conflict-resolution. This suggests that theory on this topic needs to be further developed through roleplay that reflects real life situations. Roleplays for conflict-resolution help apply theory to real life situations in a controlled and educated environment where they can receive feedback for improvement. Exposure to conflict-resolution as part of their curriculum can help to improve graduates “work readiness” by improving their confidence in entering the workplace. This is reinforced by participant 1 who stated “I'd also say maybe like creating workshops focused on conflict-resolution. I think going into the internship, I didn't really have knowledge on conflict-resolution in terms of HR”.

The final recommendation in this theme was to place more emphasis on the transition from being a student to working full-time within the curriculum. Many participants admitted that they struggled with workplace behaviours and managing adult responsibilities. This recommendation shows how academic degrees may overlook broader non-academic skills that are also needed to be successful post-graduation. Participant 7 stated

“I think maybe even in college, if you're kind of given a talk about how you're going to go from seeing your friends five days a week to not seeing them every day. I think something is probably needed about like how do you make the jump from being in college full-time to being a full-time working professional and maybe even how to deal with money. I feel like that's kind of like the big thing when you start your first job and you're like how do I actually survive with the money that I'm getting. I think maybe something in college could address that. How to plan for the future, how to look after your mental health. That was a big thing when we started working professionally. It's a big life change, and I think we're not really prepared for it as we should be”.

This theme highlights that graduates have their own understanding of “work readiness” and can offer recommendations for curriculum improvements that align with this understanding.

They emphasise the need for HR work placement, technical skills training, interview preparation, and preparation for the complex challenges.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter interprets the findings of this research and examines how they answer the research objectives and connects to broader existing literature on graduate WR within the HR sector. This research examined the work readiness of recent HR graduates and the alignment between provided curriculum and employers expectations. The findings from this research resulted in five overarching themes: (1) misalignment, (2) work experience, (3) technical skills, (4) soft skills, (5) recommendations. Each theme is discussed with reference to existing literature and the implications of these findings are also discussed.

6.2 Interpretation of Findings

6.2.1 Theme 1 – Misalignment

The first theme highlights the misalignment between the curriculum provided for students and employer expectations for graduates. Participants felt their curriculum were overly focused on theory, often on a more strategic level, leaving them feeling unprepared for the entry level operational aspects of HR roles. Research conducted by Bogdány *et al.*, (2023) revealed a misalignment between the competency employers consider necessary for entry level roles and those emphasised in HEI curriculum. For example, usually a focus on leadership knowledge suggests that HEIs align their curriculum closer to the strategic needs of managers instead of entry level roles which are more operational.

Participants revealed they found their curriculums provided enough focus on employment law and strategic modules but gave limited opportunities to apply this theory into the workplace. This finding is in line with research from Ressler and Shaw, (2022), who found that many students believe they had adequate knowledge of theory and felt that their knowledge of subjects such as employment law was a competitive advantage for them. Despite confidence in their knowledge, some students noted that their studies lacked practical application. This created a challenge when they entered into the workplace, as they lacked prior experience in the practical application of their knowledge.

The transition into full-time employment was described as challenging due to the lack of experience in a work environment. Research by Lisá *et al.* (2019) shows that some employers

have not hired recent graduates based on the fact that they don't have enough practical experience despite being academically qualified. Jackson (2015) also notes that graduates admitted feeling underprepared and found it challenging to enter the workplace without work experience. This reflects the identity challenge described by Tomlinson (2017) in which graduates need to adapt in order to project a professional persona without work experience, graduates lack the foundation to construct their professional identity.

Participants reported that they felt employers often required an unrealistic amount of work experience for entry level roles despite these positions being advertised towards recent graduates. This reinforces the research by Jackson (2015) who highlights the expectation from employers for graduates to have a level of competency that often takes years of professional experience to develop. This challenge creates a barrier to access roles and contributes to the idea that graduates lack competencies desired in the workplace.

6.2.2 Theme 2 – Work Experience

The second theme highlights the importance of HR work placement in aligning graduate capabilities to employer requirements. Participants who completed HR work experience as a part of their degree admitted that they believed it gave them an advantage in the practical application of theory, and in developing technical and soft skills, which are both essential when entering full-time employment. Ressler and Shaw (2022) show that there is a correlation between work experience and confidence in demonstrating capabilities. Work experience also provides an advantage as it provides tangible proof of technical competencies and social skills that employers desire.

HR work placement opportunities that are a part of the curriculum provide an environment to apply theory to real-life situations, and develops technical skills. This is consistent with findings from Paadi (2014) who acknowledges that graduates often possess academic knowledge on technical skills but struggle to apply it practically. This research suggests that work integrated learning such as work placements are crucial for graduates' employability to gain entry-level positions. Their research proposes that the responsibility for providing work experience should not be placed solely on HEIS but be shared with employers, ensuring work placement is provided to align with the competencies required by employers.

Work placement also gave students the opportunity to develop transferable skills such as teamwork, adaptability, presentation skills and time management. These are skills identified by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2025) as skills needed to be a successful HR graduate.

Students whose degree didn't offer them the opportunity to complete HR work placement voiced they felt at a disadvantage compared to those who had the opportunity to completed a work placement with their curriculum. This disadvantage was in the development of technical capabilities, soft skills and practical application of theory, and in recruitment competitiveness. This is in line with findings from Lisá *et al.* (2019) that showed employers have refused recent graduates if they haven't had enough HR related work experience. Ressler and Shaw (2022) also suggest that students who didn't have this experience lack communication, listening skills and lack the ability to form new relationships or understand professional environments.

6.2.3 Theme 3 – Technical Skills

The third theme focuses on graduates' capabilities in technical skills, including HR systems, data management and GDPR requirements. Participants said that they mostly developed their technical capacities through workplace exposure rather than during their studies. Jackson (2015) found that students learned new technical capabilities and strengthened their existing ones throughout their roles, this suggests that technical skills aren't taught adequately within the curriculum. Ressler and Shaw (2022) found that their participants noted a lack of technical skills, such as with technology systems, and that they learned these skills while in the role.

Participants admitted challenged dealing with confidential data as it wasn't focused on during their studies, this finding highlights a need for degrees to incorporate this into their curriculum as Adewusi and Okiti (2023) defines these are core skills for HR professionals due to legal, ethical and operational reasons.

6.2.4 Theme 4 – Soft Skills

The fourth theme focuses on the importance of soft skills, such as communication, adaptability and emotional intelligence in early HR careers. Participants admitted that competencies related to soft skills can contribute to HR career success just as much as

technical competencies. This aligns with the findings from Charterina *et al.* (2019) that found that soft skills, such as values and attitudes are the most appreciated in recent graduates. Their research suggests that graduates who have desirable attitudes and values are better able to adapt to new environments, even if they lack technical competencies. Paadi (2014) found that having soft skills can also contribute to higher job success and satisfaction.

Participants felt that the Covid-19 pandemic halted their opportunity to develop soft skills such as communications and conflict-resolution. This reflects research done by Brennan *et al.*, (2023) that showed how Covid-19 negatively affected the development of soft skills for students due to the sudden disruption of their education and switch to online delivery. Students felt the development of their team-work and communication skills were hindered, which are essential to success in full-time employment. Stallings (2024) also found that Covid-19 negatively affect the development of social skills of students as online learning made it harder to have interactions that required those skills.

Despite the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, one participant shared a positive perspective, they felt that the shift to online learning mimicked the nature of modern workplaces. They explained that this experience helped them develop skills used in communicating with colleagues online. Hamouche (2023) highlights how the pandemic challenged organisations and offered them an opportunity to change the way they were operating to a more online collaborative fashion. Remote working was introduced as a result of the pandemic and positively improved work-life balance for many employees (Vahdat, 2021).

The findings from this study reflect a misalignment leading to participants admitting they feel unprepared for dealing with complex HR issues and the recruitment process. Hager and Holland (2006) found that upon examination of early HR roles, participants said they felt they weren't taught soft skills and felt it was left to them to learn these competencies outside of their studies. They also said that although they were theoretically taught about complex issues in the workplace, they still felt they lacked the skills to deal with them practically in the workplace. However, this finding contradicts a theory from Paadi (2014) which states that graduates will always feel slightly unprepared for full-time employment as they state that curriculums can't provide the necessary soft skills needed.

Participants stated that they felt unprepared to be interviewed due to their lack of experience with the social skills needed. Stewart *et al.* (2016) highlights that graduates interview skills are an area of concern from employers, stating that during an interview employers look for verbal communication, active listening, problem solving and interpersonal skills. Krishnan *et al.* (2017) observed that HR managers rate graduates poorly on interview skills, stemming from an inability to comprehend questions, to answer questions in a professional manner, or to elaborate.

6.2.5 Theme 5 – Recommendations

This theme summarises the recommendations from participants on how to improve their curriculum and align their capabilities with employer expectations, ultimately improving graduate “work readiness”.

Majority of participants suggested adding compulsory HR work placement. This recommendation has already been made in research conducted in South Africa, where it was suggested to HEI’s to add compulsory work placement to increase their employability. Jackson (2015) highlighted that work experience is necessary for developing employability skills, including both soft skills and technical competencies, and it allows students to practice these skills in a practical way, increasing their ability to practically apply theory. Chigbu and Nekhwevha (2022) note how work experience can also help students develop new skills and how the experience acts as an entry into a professional setting.

Other suggestions included introducing workshops for interview skills and conflict-resolution roleplays. This aligns with Symonds and O’Sullivan (2017) found that their participants reported interview focused activities to be very effective in increasing their employability. Bracken *et al.* (2022) suggested that activities like interview coaching can help students shape their knowledge and experiences in a more academic way which increases their employability. Jackson (2015) showed that scenario-based activities were highly successful across various degrees in applying theory to real life scenarios, and the addition of roleplays would add in more creative ways to get students to engage with the curriculum.

It was also suggested to incorporate lab sessions in the HR curriculum as a way to learn technical competencies such as HR systems. HR systems were reported to be mainly learned

once a graduate has started their new role. Ressler and Shaw (2022) identified the lack of knowledge on how to use HR systems as a weakness of graduates. Learning these systems would increase the competencies graduates can display, increasing their employability.

6.2.6 Unexpected Findings

One participant stated that they thought the Covid-19 pandemic aided in them learning to communicate online, a skill they use daily in their role. This was an unexpected and contradicting finding as most research looks at the negative impact of Covid-19 such as Stallings (2024) who found that social skills including communication, coordination and teamwork were negatively affected. In agreement with this finding, Brennan *et al.* (2023) found that graduates reported an increase in their resilience, time management and stress management as a result of the move to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another unexpected finding was some participants felt that non-HR work experience gave them an advantage as they learned transferable skills useful in their HR careers. This reinforces the literature that says work experience plays a significant role in preparing students from full-time employability such as Tomlinson (2017). However, the literature focuses on the benefits of HR related experience, and not non-HR related experience. This finding suggests that it doesn't matter the sector of the work experience. Ressler and Shaw (2022) suggest that employers value extra-curriculum activities and volunteer work in addition to HR related work experience as it demonstrates a graduate's capabilities beyond an academic focus.

6.3 Implications for Findings

6.3.1 Curriculum

The findings of this research show a need for more integration of practical skills and a need for more technical skill development. This research suggests that students were not confident in their ability to apply theory to practical situations or to demonstrate technical competencies typically associated with entry level HR roles, specifically HR systems. It would benefit students to add mandatory work placement and labs to learn HR systems, into curriculums to increase these technical competencies and improve graduates' confidence in their ability to demonstrate them in the workplace. It would also benefit students to add more opportunities

to apply theory to practical situations such as implementing conflict-resolution roleplays, familiarity with these situations before entering full-time employment would increase graduates confidence in their capabilities. These additions would help to align provided curriculums to what employers expect and improve graduates confidence and WR (Lisá *et al.*, 2019).

These findings also show the need for more focus on soft skills, such as communication, teamwork and critical thinking to be added to the curriculum. This research highlights that graduates did not feel confident in their ability to demonstrate the expected level of soft skills in cases like during grievances, disciplines or during interviews. Incorporating the use of these skills more within the curriculum would increase graduates' confidence in their soft skills and familiarise them with how they are expected to act in a professional work environment (Krishnan *et al.*, 2017).

6.3.2 Employers

Employers considering hiring recent HR graduates should implement structured onboarding and mentoring to ensure graduates have their desired technical capabilities and provide them with opportunities to continuously develop their soft skills through collaboration. This finding is in line with Ressler and Shaw (2022) who state that employers have a role in supporting new graduates and suggest a minimum period of two weeks for onboarding. Stallings (2024) suggests a method of matching new graduates with experienced mentors within the organisation to help them develop their soft skills such as critical thinking and effective communication. Entry level job descriptions should be more realistic to reflect the experience of graduates and avoid requiring unrealistic experience that may deter academically qualified candidates. Tomlinson *et al.* (2023) suggested that advertising entry-level roles with the expectancy of unrealistic experience can have a negative effect on graduates' confidence and their employability. Incorporating more collaboration with universities through case studies, guest speakers and work experience will also help align academic curriculums with employer expectations (Osmani *et al.*, 2019).

6.3.3 Graduates

Students should be advised to take a proactive approach to developing their WR such as participating in work experience and attending networking events. This engagement combined with the development of technical and soft skills will increase graduate confidence and employability. By taking a proactive approach to their education graduates demonstrate imitative and willingness to learn, which are deemed as desirable traits by employers (Lisá *et al.*, 2019). Engaging in these experiences will help graduates develop a personal narrative that help demonstrate their employability (Hager and Holland, 2006).

6.4 Strengths

This research focuses on an under explored area of recent HR graduates in Ireland regarding their perspective of the effectiveness of their curriculum in their transition into full-time employment. The findings from this research presents relevant insights that can be directly applied to HEIs, employers and graduates. Using a qualitative method for this research allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants perspectives. Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share detailed reflection of their experiences and opinions. The use of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis allowed for the exploration of themes in the level of WR of graduates considering their work placement, technical competencies and soft skills.

6.5 Limitations

This study used a small sample of eight students who have graduated from an Irish HEI within the last 5 years due to time constraints however, this allowed for a deep understanding of the data. Due to time constraints this research was unable to adopt a mixed methods approach, which would have further deepened the findings. This study was set within the Irish sector due to both time and cost constraints, while this is similar to other EU sectors, it would be more relevant to increase the geographical scope of the research to further generalise the findings to be applicable to the EU. This research also relied on self-reflection from students which may be subject to bias. However, this study is robust, and the findings provide valuable insights into the graduates' perspective of their WR. Another limitation is this study looks at the perception of graduates at. Single point in time, and not a longitudinal study, which would allow for the tracking of their development over time.

6.6 Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the WR of recent HR graduates, examining the alignment between the capabilities provided to students from their curriculum and those expected by employers. The analysis resulted in five overarching themes: (1) misalignment, (2) work experience, (3) technical skills, (4) soft skills, (5) recommendations.

While participants reported feeling somewhat confident in their theoretical knowledge they admitted to lacking the skills to apply it to real-life situations, causing them to face challenges in their transition into full-time employment. Participants offered many recommendations on elements to incorporate into their curriculum to increase their capabilities and their employability. Despite some limitations, such as the geographical scope and reliance on self-reflection, this research has many strengths and highlights the importance of aligning curriculums to increase technical and soft skills with those employers expect. These findings prove practical recommendations for HEIs, employers and students and contribute to an understanding of graduate WR.

Recommendations for future research include using a larger sample size with more participants from different HEIs around Europe to expand the geographical scope so its findings can be more generalised and highlight any cultural differences that may affect graduate WR. Using a mixed methods approach would gather a greater depth of data and enable findings to be measured in a more tangible way. A longitudinal study would help provide data on how WR evolves over time post-graduation. Exploring graduate WR an employer's perspective would further help to align the discrepancy evident in this research. A deeper inclusion of the impact of non-HR work experience would explore the impact of soft skills such as critical thinking, adaptability and communication further.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to explore the WR of recent HR graduates through their perspective, focusing on the misalignment of competencies employers expect and those demonstrated by graduates. The research question was *“Exploring the work readiness of recent Human Resource graduates and how effectively the curriculum provided by their Higher Education Institute prepared them for full-time employment”*.

This research began by reviewing broader existing literature on the topic of graduates WR and their competencies and identifying any gaps in the literature that needed further research to determine if the current curriculum was efficiently preparing student for full-time employment.

7.2 Data Collection

A qualitative methodological approach was used to conduct this research as it allows for the exploration and understanding of a subject. This research focuses on the HR sector, specifically the perspective of recent graduates on their transition into full-time employment. The sample was chosen through purposive sampling and was comprised of individuals who graduated less than five years ago from an Irish HEI. This research faced a challenge recruiting participants as all participants are now in full-time employment and Microsoft Teams was chosen as a means to conveniently conduct interviews online. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight participants and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step thematic analysis approach, resulting in five overarching themes to answer the research question. The five overarching themes are: (1) the mismatch between curriculum and workplace, (2) importance of HR work placement, (3) technical skills, (4) soft skills, (5) recommendations.

7.3 Findings

The findings of this research show a clear and consistent discrepancy between the competencies graduates demonstrate and those employers expect. Participant acknowledged feeling confident in their academic theory but expressed a lack of technical skills, soft skills and ability to apply theory to practical situations. Strategic modules were perceived to be less

applicable to the operational nature of entry-level HR roles. This lack of opportunity meant many graduates were learning new capabilities while in their roles. Relevant work experience was revealed as an important element to increasing graduates WR and developing essential competencies, easing the transition into full-time employment. Contrastingly, participants who did not have the opportunity to do work experience expressed that they felt disadvantaged and recommending implementing mandatory work placement into curriculums. Participants also revealed they felt disadvantaged by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the decrease of in-person interactions hindered the development of their soft skills, which are also essential competencies for HR professionals. Participants found it challenging to navigate emotionally complex situations in the workplace such as resolving conflicts and found it challenging to apply learned theory to real life situations. Beyond technical and soft skills, graduates expressed that key attributes and traits were needed to be a successful HR graduate. They identified these key traits as willingness to learn, resilience, and adaptability. Strong recommendations were made for the implementation of compulsory work experience, HR skills labs, interview preparation workshops and conflict-resolution roleplays.

This research highlights that preparing graduates for full-time employment requires combining theory and practical applications. This suggests that HEIs have an opportunity to collaborate with employers and students to ensure their curriculum is relevant and effectively prepare graduates for employment.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to participate

My name is Alicia Halpin, and I am conducting research as part of a Master's in Human Resource Management at the National College of Ireland. I am researching the work readiness of recent HR graduates.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask for clarification if needed or if you would like further information in any area relating to participation.

You have been invited to participate as you are a recent graduate in Human Resources and are currently working in a related role. My interest is to explore your perception of work readiness in graduates, moving from college to the world of work. It is expected the interview would last approximately 25 – 35 minutes and may require possible follow up if there is a need for clarification.

Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time for whatever reason. This includes your right to withdraw your interview from the research after it has taken place. If you exercise your right to withdraw your participation, you will not be asked to give your reasons.

You will not be named or otherwise identified in any publication arising from this research, and no unpublished opinions or information will be attributed to you. On completion the Thesis will be stored in the Thesis library at NCI and will be available for lending to any staff member who may wish to read it. All results of the research will be used solely for the submission of the thesis for final grading.

Signed consent forms, original audio and visual recordings and notes taken during the interview will be stored in a secure place until after my degree has been conferred. A transcript of interviews in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for a further two years after this. Under freedom of information legislation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

Appendix B: Copy of Microsoft forms participation consent form

Please read the following form and sign you name at the bottom to show you consent to being a part of this research. Thank you.

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

1. I understand upon participation, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

Yes

No

2.I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

Yes

No

3.I understand that participation involves an interview of approx. 30 minutes with a possible follow up for clarification if needed.

Yes

No

4.I understand that there are no personal or direct gains for me from participating in this study.

Yes

No

5.I agree to my interview being visually and audio-recorded.

Yes

No

6.I understand that all the information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

Yes

No

7.I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

Yes

No

8.I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the final thesis.

Yes

No

9.Sign your name below

Appendix C: List of interview questions

1. Can you describe your academic background?
2. When did you graduate?
3. Why did you choose to study human resources?
4. What job are you currently in and can you describe your role?
5. What aspects of your role is informed by what you learned in your studies?
6. What modules have you drawn from the most/least?
7. Have you had to learn anything on the job that you didn't from your studies?
8. When you graduated, did you feel ready to begin work? Why/Why not?
9. Was there a specific area you felt confident in? Didn't feel confident in?
10. Tell me about the transition from being a student to working?
11. What were the challenges you faced when settling into your new job?
12. Do you think college could have prepared you better/differently?
13. Can you reflect on any situations during your career where you feel you would have benefitted from more knowledge or skills regarding particular issues? - can you share examples.
14. What makes a good HR graduate?

15. Do you think there is a mismatch between what employers are looking for and the current human resource curriculum for students?

If yes - Why do you think this? What can be done to align?

16. Is there anything you think would be relevant but we haven't discussed?

Appendix D: Extract of Coding for theme 4: soft skills

Extract of theme 4 coding		
Stage 1: Open coding	Stage 2: Initial themes	Stage 3: Overarching themes
Not confident in dealing with people	Essential soft skills	Critical soft skills
Not comfortable dealing with ethical awareness	Changes in social dynamic	Impact of Covid-19
Not comfortable with employee relations	Essential social skills	Emotional preparedness
Communication	Impact of Covid-19 pandemic	Interview preparedness
Public speaking	Unpreparedness	Key graduate traits
Adaptness	Workshops	
Confidence		
Willingness to learn		
Behaviour in a new environment		
Interview skills		

Appendix E: Redacted transcript from interview with participant 6

Interviewer

My first question is could you describe your academic background for me? Where you went to college and if you can remember any of the modules that you studied?

Participant 6

Yeah, I got my Bachelor's of Science in Human Resource Management in (participants college). I started in 20XX, so just at the start of COVID. My first year was online and half of my second year was too, and it was four years. So I've just finished, graduating there November of 20XX. It was labelled as a human resource management course. I will say there was a good mix of modules that could have been more business management related as well. And I remember one of our head lecturers for that course, she even kind of said herself it should probably have been human resource management and business, but we won't get into that. It covered your basics, you had your human resource management, you had your EU frameworks, employment law, then you kind of looked on more management size, strategic management, organisational change and even communications and marketing. It really did get a good feel for kind of all different areas in a business.

Interviewer

Amazing, you said that your first year was during covid, do you feel like you missed out on developing any soft skills that you would need for entering the workspace?

Participant 6

Mhm. A little bit, yeah. I do think it helped in terms of, I suppose it got everyone more used to online interviews and preparing themselves and getting themselves set up on, let's say, Microsoft Teams, for example. Well, in terms of when it came to like socializing with people or even kind of just when it came to projects and trying to get to know the people that you're working with, it made it a lot more difficult. So in terms of like you might know someone's name and then you don't know their face and it gets a little confusing. Then you can't communicate across with what you guys are helping each other with in terms of a team projects. So it made that kind of difficult. So in a way it kind of hindered maybe my first year of college. I probably wouldn't have said was the best in terms of that. But then offices have now implemented that kind of system themselves, because obviously working from home is a lot more prominent these days. It helped in that aspect now because now I'm more used to communicating with people solely online because they might be working in office in America or in the UK and the only thing I have to go off is their little face in a thing. But I suppose I'm getting better communicating things across those channels that helped from my first year. I

suppose it kind of just helped me set up with that new system that was rolling in because obviously before it was a lot, it was fully on site, five days a week, everyone's in an office and of course that's not the case anymore, so I suppose it helped with that transition.

Interviewer

I think it's so fascinating the impact that Covid had on literally everything. It's changed the way that everything works, like schools and businesses. I think it is great that like it got us used to, as you say, communicating online. But um, I think a lot of people have felt that because it was a transitional period for people our age that it kind of hindered a lot of the like social skills because going from like secondary school to college nearly mimics the transition from college to workplace as well.

Participant 6

Yeah. 100%. Yeah.

Because even like a college student maybe are more in tune with the technology but then there's the professor that had no idea how to use it. All their stuff was a book that someone had to buy and now they have no idea how to upload online or do their projects online. And it just there was a bit of a clash for a bit when everyone has to try to figure it out. We got there in the end, but a lot of there's a lot of push now to get a lot of people back into offices now. Obviously there's a lot of policies going in about being like a minimum of one or two days in the office a week or a minimum of accumulated days over a month, which is fair enough. I think a lot of people probably took the working from home a little bit to, uh, got a bit cosy.

Interviewer

Hopefully they'll be able to find a balance. And so why did you choose to study human resources?

Participant 6

I knew when I was kind of filling in my CAO I was always, I never really had a set mindset of what I wanted to do. It's not like I was like, I know I want to be a mechanical engineer. That was kind of the one path I wanted to go down. So I knew my safest option would probably go down a route of some type of business study.

And then surrounding me, I actually knew a few people who are in human resource management and I remember talking with them and I always heard that they always said it very interesting. And then when I came to looking it up, when I was looking at different

courses, the human resource management course in (college) was one that I always just kind of gravitated towards because like I said earlier, they not only kind of focused on human resource management, but they also had a few business courses that kind of let you see different fields of business as well. And I thought that might be handy when I was applying for jobs that maybe if I found out in the human resource management wasn't something I wasn't fully invested in. I could have done a course in communications and marketing and I'm happy enough to, let's say if I wanted a veer off and get a master's in marketing, I knew I had a starting point somewhere and I was very small starting point, but it would have been something. So between that course and human resource management already peaking my interest, that's kind of the path I went down. I also found myself thinking I could be more of an empathetic people person and I quite like the idea of being someone that another person could come to if they needed help with something, whether that be their well-being or their rights. I always find that interesting, it is quite a diverse sector to be in because one day could just be consoling someone and another be giving out to someone because it's they're not doing something within the law. So I feel like it's a versatile course that I was happy to venture into rather than kind of putting myself into a box, maybe.

Interviewer

Amazing. And just to go back to, um, your degree there for a moment, was there any sort of internship or work experience required or did you have the option to do that at all?

Participant 6

Oh yeah. So in my third year for the second semester, the that that was purely for an internship that you had to take. And if you weren't doing an internship, it had to be an Erasmus. I'm personally did the internship, which I'm very happy about because I do find it's very helpful. It's very like you need it if you're going into a human resource setting. So like the EU frameworks and employment law and employee well-being, those are like extremely important to know if you're going into human resources. Like the EU frameworks, you need to know what like the employee rights are and if you're drawing policies, like what's the correct information that you need to have in it? Like you can't just write anything down that you want. But I find in college there's only so much you can do theoretically. Myself personally, I'm a very more of a practical learner than I am theory, so as much as I can like kind of read something over and over again and make flashcards and teach it to myself, it always will slip out of my mind eventually, which is completely frustrating for me, especially during exam season. But if I'm actually putting it into a real life situation there, it's more likely to stick in my brain. So when we had the internship, I found it a lot more beneficial for myself because I am more of a practical learner than I am a theory learner. So there's probably one

thing I probably would have wanted. Maybe that would have been a year-long internship for me and I probably would have been happier, would have grown my confidence as well. But I suppose that kind of studying is a subjective thing for the person. Like I know I'm more practical. But I know a few courses that are like it could be a four-year course if you take the third year to do an internship or you can cut it short. So I feel like maybe that would have been a good implementation to have in my course. But again, yeah, so that was really long winded answer. I did an internship.

Interviewer

No, please talk as much as you want to answer all the questions, it's very insightful. And then just ask about your current job. So what job are you currently in and could you describe your role?

Participant 6

Currently I'm in (organisation). Now I've only been here a month. I'm the HR coordinator for their office at the moment. Um, I just started about a month ago, so I'm still kind of learning new systems, but at the moment I'm kind of organising people's annual leave days. I'm creating templates now because they're kind of integrating into Dublin and kind of creating their own policies and templates that kind of suit Irish law rather than the ones already from UK law, so I'm kind of helping create templates now for a return to work form and an exit interview form. And I created just there yesterday like a letter for people have passed their probation, just that can be sent out because they don't have from the previous person that was here, they don't have a lot of documentation. I'm also helping organize the documents to make sure everyone does have their contract, and their right to work. So I'm making sure that they're all following the regulations to have the right documentations. So it's slowly just kind of getting through and then obviously I'm able to call and talk to everyone. So if anyone has a HR query, whether that be about the holidays or open vacancy and then I'm going through job applications as well. So it's a little bit from everywhere. It's all very entry level type jobs because again, I'm only fresh out of college. There's only so much I can do and there's only so much that I could like be approved for I guess. So it's all a learning curve. I am only just getting started with this company because I did get, I was lucky enough to get a HR administrator role just after graduating as well, but it was just for a different company and it was kind. It was more or less the same roles, just with their systems and stuff. I think there's only so much you can do with the experience that you have from college. This is why I probably also think that a year long experience would be better because I found it so difficult when applying for jobs afterwards. My field, even if they're advertisers, entry level jobs, a lot of HR roles, they're like, oh, it's a literally a HR administrator. It's kind of at the bottom. You

can't really get any lower than that. And they're like, I want minimum two years' experience and a bachelor's and a masters. And I'm like, OK, you can only really get one in that situation. Like I don't understand how you exactly have two years' worth of experience, but also a degree from a four-year course. It kind of starts clashing. And so the only thing I had, I think even that gave me an edge when I was applying was my six months internship. I maybe I could have had a better if I had a one year internship, but that's that was just me. Maybe that was just my experience. Someone could have a different experience. But yeah, I'm happy enough here. There's going to be policies that will need to be drawn up. So it's going to be a lot of research and brushing up on my own knowledge on the EU legislation and employment law because I suppose sometimes it's easy to forget about it.

Interviewer

Yeah, I feel like in terms of like legislation and law and stuff like that, it's constantly changing. So like obviously you learn like the foundation about it in college, but then like once you're actually into a job, you constantly have to keep updating your knowledge yourself.

Interviewer

It's like a very busy day today, but it sounds like you're getting on great there. So if you were to think about then your studies and your current role, what would you say, what aspects of your current role are informed by what you studied?

Participant 6

Like from modules, kind of like what I've already said, like from learning in college, the EU frameworks I think would have been extremely important. The employment law, employee well-being, of course, obviously, because if someone's on the right mental state, they're not going to be able to get their job as best they can. Um, organisational change was a course I did as well, which is it was an interesting one. I suppose even now, let's say this whole rebranding thing that's happening, it's a whole change in like other people's titles or the things. So getting to the gist of that, make sure everyone's following that is quite handy and it's they're all something I use to implement small things, even strategical management, just trying to telling people how to act and stuff, because even in this, uh, job, it's there's a there's a lot of gaming that's involved in it. So a lot of people here actually are doing their first jobs as well so trying to connect with them in a friendly way that they're open enough to be able to talk to in case there is something wrong, because obviously that's really important. But kind of being able to manage them to let them know, being like, OK, remember now this is still a workplace like you need to present yourself professionally. Like you can't be cursing someone out down the hall. You can't be screaming. You can't be like

abbreviating in your emails if you're sending them off. So I suppose that will kind of be the main thing. I also did macroeconomics and stuff in my course and I never really understood why. Like I haven't. I haven't needed it since. But potentially down the line I could, so it might be a lot handier. But yeah, I think the I think the main ones that were helpful from college would probably be all the things that were kind of around employee rights and the law. Even recruitment was actually quite helpful for me, obviously when you're screening CVS, you're looking out for keywords and stuff that makes sense. So there's different theories like that that stick out to me, but again, I'm a lot more of a practical person when it comes to remembering how to do things right. So if there's only so much I can read and do an exam, unless like I need, I need to be doing it myself in an actual professional setting, but that's just me, so I don't know.

Interviewer

No, I definitely feel like a lot of people are hands on learners. It just sticks in your brain. So if you then were again to think about all the modules that you studied, would you say that there is some modules that you haven't drawn on at all in your role?

Participant 6

Probably. I had a macroeconomics, and microeconomics module. I actually, I feel like I remember even sitting that exam and I was just, I was all over the place. I actually couldn't tell you what I did in it. Like I haven't used it since. I haven't thought about it since. There was an accounting course as well. Now I suppose it's helpful in the aspect if you were in that course to also take the business aspect of it as well. But I suppose I didn't and I haven't needed to do accounting since. Like I've had to do some numbers with things, but that's more or less just multiplying and dividing.

So anything mathematical wasn't really like I did. I didn't see a point in necessarily. Um, I can't even think because you know anything that I didn't really there were definitely was is my point. I'm trying to say I just there. I'm blanking on them purely because I suppose if I didn't find that useful for me. It hasn't really stuck out in my brain as to why I needed it, if that makes sense. That sounds awful. The poor professor's teaching away and I'm not paying attention. But it was just the case with a few of them, but I suppose they were just kind of covering all the grounds. It might have been more helpful for other people.

Interviewer

That's so fair. And then is there anything that you've had to learn on the job that you didn't study?

Participant 6

To be honest, I feel like everything you learn on the job would probably be something I haven't studied for in particular because every situation's so different.

Um, like you'll know, you'll know all the kind of theory behind everything, but I suppose when you got your first situation of it is a lot different. I would like, let's say obviously when you're applying for a sick day, new regulation now is five paid sick days and it's like, OK, well you learn it's five paid sick days and if the person goes over 5, then you kind of have to, let's say, notify your payroll team and they're applying for social welfare. It's all well understood in that. But then when I come in.

And someone's actually gone over the five paid sick days and they're not getting paid for that anymore. Now it's like they have to apply for social welfare. I have to let them know they're paying for it. And then I have to go back and then implement that with payroll. And it's a whole different situation. So like, I'm learning it, but I haven't learned how to actually like implement it into the office because obviously then it's also going to be different for every office. So maybe that's why they haven't taught it.

But it's kind of like you'll hear about the law, let's say, and what that what everyone's entitled to and it's always minimum 20 annual leave days. But then if someone's getting more, how do you implement that, why are they getting more? They have to have these conversations. It's never just like a sign, like it's never just like, Oh yeah, that's grant. It has to go through like 5 different people has to be approved. Is it within the budget? So I suppose it's kind of, it seems a bit more lax when you're learning about it in college. So when you come here and it's like, it's not that easy, like you have to research it, get five different sources to say this. You have to go back to three different people and talk about it. You need to get approved by the CEO. And I'm just like, oh, here, like I was like the poor guy and I'm like, it's meant to be my job. Up to you to have like the business mind as well, but I'm also like you can't force someone to come in if they're like dying of the flu at home. So it's like it's trying to get a good balance of kind of being able to implement what you also learn and then like I suppose when you're learning about it's all about business, this is what's best for the business, but then when you actually get it in real life as well. It's like these are real people. Like half of them don't really have the interest of the business in mind either because it's kind of like, do you know what? Let's be honest here, a lot of people are just going to work to get paid and that's a lot of people's mindset, which is fine, but you have to like look after them as well. So it's there's one thing learning it and there's one thing implementing it and actually having. Other people's well-being in mind, which is a bit crazy I think.

Interviewer

No, that totally makes sense. And then when you graduated, did you feel ready to begin working?

Participant 6

Not in the sense that I was like, I'm a business lady and I'm ready to take over the corporate world. I wasn't like that. It was more so just because I really was not, uh, enjoying like shift work anymore. I was working in (shop) just before I actually got like an office job. So I was ready for like a set schedule. So in that aspect, I wanted out of my old job and into the new one. Like I was happy because again, applying for jobs in this market is really hard without any type of experience and I just feel like the longer you put it off it's just going to make it a little bit more difficult down the line. Even people with 10 years' experience were having difficulties getting jobs. So I was more than happy just to get into it straight away. But and I've I suppose with my college course it did in my mind I was like I have a degree and like this should be easier. I'm happy with what I've learned and in that aspect I was ready to get into it.

Interviewer

That's amazing. Yeah. People at the moment are definitely struggling so badly with getting jobs.

Participant 6

Even going from let's say I was like working in (shop), they're open Monday to Sunday. If I need a certain day off that week, I'll just swap with someone. I'll work a different day. Now it's like if I need to go to the doctor, I actually have to take like a book it off. It is like an environmental change going from like one to another, like going into an office job. It does make you feel like a grown up. Like I'm still walking around here under everybody's of what age you. I'm like, I'm only 23. I feel like I'm like, I feel like I'm only doing like an internship now. In my mind I'm like I still have my summer holidays next year. It's fine. No, I don't. And it's like, it's kind of mind boggling, but it had to be done eventually. I did have that mindset, so I'm happy that I kind of stuck with what I wanted to do and it's turning out good so far. I suppose I'm still like, like I said, I'm actually getting an experience now that's helping me learn better, I suppose, future down the line. Who knows if I stay in HR, I'm not sure. But in the meantime, I think I'm doing pretty fine. Like even when I did my internship, it helped me start my, like get into the recruitment process a lot, because that's what a lot I did in my internship. So when it came to these other two jobs, I had no issues when it came to, um, recruiting people or like uploading job descriptions or calling candidates to like screen and do a screen call or organise an interview or getting their references. I did a lot of reference

calls, so that internship I think helped me implement it into these new jobs so I could have an easier transition than I suppose if I didn't have any of that.

Interviewer

That's so fair. Yeah, I feel like HR has a lot of transferable skills, even that could be like transferred to anything outside of HR. And then when you did begin working, was there any area that you didn't feel confident in because you didn't have any experience in it through college?

Participant 6

I guess it's not that I didn't have confidence in. I'm just I'm very and I'm still am a little bit is I'm still weary of when it comes to implementing like a law like an employment law into something like I only I know the basics but I feel like it's always such it's always such a touchy topic when like if you were to reach out to someone about something in particular, you need to be very phrase yourself very correctly because you don't want to say something that person goes up what you've said and then it ends up being an illegal statement of something and you're like, oh, I don't know what Participant 6 told me that like she should know and I'm like, Oh my God. So in terms of just making sure I get my facts right. But I haven't had that issue yet, thank God, because I usually do end up like triple checking it. It's up to yourself to stay up to date with what laws are changing and what's being put into place. I can't really remember a college highlighting that to me to make sure to stay on top of it. They more so just focus on what's already there.

Interviewer

You can study so much, but it'll only ever give you so much confidence. You definitely need that real world experience to help build your confidence, like you said. When you started your role, did you face any challenges settling in, even in your last job or your internship? Because I know you're only still new to this role.

Participant 6

100%. Yeah, um, I just think. I think the whole shift from a like a student to I'm like an employee of thing. I think the whole the change for me was like when you're a student, you are only responsible for yourself, I'm creating my own schedule, I'm creating like if I want to do the work, I'll do the work. If I didn't, I didn't. I'm all like I'm kind of making my own timelines, deadlines and I'm organizing my own self. Whereas then when you go into an office setting and it's not like a lecture on a couple projects that you have to do and you're

not just responsible for myself anymore. I'm responsible for other people now as well with being in a HR department. I'm responsible to help the running of a business and I think that whole environmental shift is a bit like, oh, OK, like I can't just like strut in and do whatever I want anymore. Like there's a set schedule. It's not just mine anymore. It's mine and my business partner schedule. It's everyone else's as well. If they need something, I need to like there's people on different times. Like you have to work with everyone. You're not just working with yourself anymore. Like even just trying to like, if there's a meeting, I can't be like, well, I'm free at two, so come at two. It's like, well, no, I'm not free at two. So then you have to work around everybody else and make sure everyone's kind of working cohesively because obviously no one can just go off and do their own thing anymore. So I think it's just it's also more so just an environmental setting for me personally because I suppose just like what I said, like you're kind of you go just being all by yourself to being in a team that needs to work together. Otherwise it's just not very cohesive.

Interviewer

Yeah, definitely. And did you face any challenges in terms of skills like technical knowledge? Before you started your job, did you have any experiences with systems that they use or you know, like presentation skills, things like that?

Participant 6

I'm happy to say I haven't had any issues. Yeah. And in the first job I had, they didn't really have their own HR system or an application that they used. So I was using Excel spreadsheets. So that's my Excel spreadsheet skills got a little bit better there. In this job they have a HR system, which I'm using to learn, that's a pretty straightforward system to use. So I've been successful so far, thank God. I haven't had any issues, but I think I feel like any HR system I've used throughout my experience, they've all been pretty straightforward, so I haven't had any technical issues and then it kind of implementing myself into these different teams and stuff. I think everyone's been very friendly and anytime I've kind of had an issue or a situation, never that big, but someone's been there to help me. I don't think anything, anything, nothing really is kind of coming to the front of my mind being like, Oh my God, yeah, this happened.

Interviewer

Amazing. And if you were to think about all that the college curriculum provided for you, do you think that college could have prepared you any differently or any better for being work ready?

Participant 6

I suppose the only thing I can really come to my mind is just kind of having more of a practical aspect throughout the college years to help you learn. But I suppose maybe then kind of being able to cater to maybe certain projects that do have that aspect to them to make sure they're covering everyone's basis. If you were able to do that in a HR setting and set up with the group and be like you are working in this company, you need to work out an employee well-being program that's going to be placed in the office. How would you go about it rather than just saying what's in it, what's do a SWOT analysis of this business, I do think maybe in that aspect that would kind of peak my interest more because it gets a little bit more creative then as well. I feel like if they had just more projects maybe on the creative aspect implemented in with all the theoretical stuff, just so they can kind of cover both bases when it comes to how people learn but again, that's just me personally. Other than that, I do think they covered a lot of a lot of the kind of information that you need when going into a human resources. Maybe some people need to learn how to kind of communicate with others. A lot of people won't realise that they need to be empathetic and being able to talk to people and being open and being friendly enough could be helpful in a way to present yourself. So maybe just more of a practical aspect or maybe a differentiation in assignments.

Interviewer

Definitely. And from all you've experienced in your roles, what would you say makes a good HR graduate? Like what skills should somebody possess to be a good HR graduate?

Participant 6

I think communication will be a big one, just being able to kind of get your points across and being able to get along with everyone. All the times you could be dealing with someone who is on compassion leave and they and they're talking to you about it, you need to be able to handle the situation in a mature manner and let them know that you're there, but like also give them the space that they need. Problem solving will be a big one as well because there obviously will be a lot of issues that would arise and just someone that kind of overall has a good understanding of practices that need to be put into place because otherwise, it's just a bit of shambles, I suppose. But yeah, communication, problem solving and just kind of kind of looking out for everyone, for the best interests of everyone. Like you need to have a good balance of looking out for the employees, but also looking out for your company that you're working for.

Interviewer

Definitely, yeah. And so if you were to think about the curriculum that you studied and obviously all you've learned now in your role, do you think that there is a mismatch between what employers are looking for and the current curriculum provided for students?

Participant 6

I feel like they kind of, they cover what they need to cover for sure. So I wouldn't particularly say that there has been a mismatch that I've noticed myself. I suppose I just think the thing is I think it's unrealistic that they want this degree and they also want experience and then but it's also an entry level role because anyone with the experience isn't going to be taking the salary of an entry level role. So it's like if you're gonna advertise a junior role for someone that's just come out of college, which is what you want. You also want three years' experience. It's not making sense. After three years, I'm not going to want an entry level role. That's the only mismatch I can really find myself personally.

Interviewer

Amazing. And then my final question is, do you think that there is anything that will be relevant to this topic but we haven't touched on?

Participant 6

No, I don't think so, but nothing comes to my mind.

Interviewer 35:23

Amazing. OK, so that is all of my questions, so I'm just gonna stop the recording