

Supporting students' employability through structured, event-based engagement with employers

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors proposed that participation in large-scale, structured events designed to match students to employers' internship opportunities could support students' employability by focussing students' career goals, strengthening students' career self-efficacy and growing students' social capital.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews were carried out with 49 students both before and after the students took part in the event to assess whether students' career goals, self-efficacy or social capital changed after taking part in the events. In the second interview, the authors also asked students what outcomes students gained from the event and how the event process had contributed to these outcomes.

Findings – Students' descriptions of their outcomes from the event aligned with social capital theory and self-efficacy theory. The students valued the information, connections, skills and experience they developed through taking part in the interviews and connecting with employers and students. The longitudinal analyses revealed that most students' career goals did not change, but students' career self-efficacy improved and students could identify more actions for achieving their career goals after taking part in the event. Importantly, these actions were often explicitly connected with information or connections that students gained from the event.

Originality/value – The interviews illustrate that students can build social capital from short, one-on-one engagement with employers that then enable them to identify ways of furthering students' career goals. The authors' findings suggest that structured, event-based engagement with employers can provide an efficient and equitable means of enhancing students' social capital and career self-efficacy.

Keywords Employability, Employer engagement, Internships, Networking, Self-efficacy, Goal-setting, Social capital, Work-integrated learning, Careers interventions

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

A greater variety of strategies are needed to support student employability and inclusion (Atkinson, 2016; Chin *et al.*, 2019; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Employers report that students lack key employability skills such as communication, business understanding, problem solving and analytics (Bist *et al.*, 2020; McMurray *et al.*, 2016; Succi and Canovi, 2020), indicating a need to better support student transitions into the workforce. In Australia, only 74.3% of graduates find full-time employment within four months of completing an undergraduate degree (Challice *et al.*, 2021). Work-integrated learning and internships offer an important means of supporting student employability (Carrell and Rowe, 1993; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Kemple and Willner, 2008) since they have been found to build

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confidence, communication skills and organisational abilities (Carrell and Rowe, 1993; Doolan *et al.*, 2019) However, the availability of these opportunities is limited (Musset and Kureková, 2018), and participation in work-integrated learning has been found to vary significantly depending on students' disciplinary background and socio-economic status.

In this study, we explore whether structured, event-based engagement between students and employers (focused on matching students to internship opportunities) offer an alternative and efficient means of supporting student employability. At these events, students take part in five-minute job interviews with multiple employers. We call these interventions "structured, event-based engagement with employers" because they follow the same format for all participants, which differentiates them from other short-term interventions aimed at supporting student employability such as career fairs and career talks. The short-term nature of the events and the fact that students interact one-on-one with multiple employers also differentiates this type of intervention from internships and work-integrated learning. They therefore provide an efficient means of giving large numbers of students the opportunity to experience a short job interview with real employers, in a relatively low-stakes environment.

The events are tailored for a particular cohort of students and employers so that the internships on offer are likely to be relevant to students' field of study. The events begin with an introduction from the host and guest speakers followed by each employer providing a short presentation on their organisation and their internship opportunities. This stage lasts for approximately thirty minutes. The second stage of the event (which lasts for approximately one hour) is called "speed networking". Each employer takes one table and students line up at the tables of their choice to take part in a five-minute interview that is designed to match students to internship opportunities. At the end of each five-minute interval, a bell is rung, signalling that it is time for the "interview" to wrap up and another student to take their turn. The students at the event outnumber the employers (the ratio is approximately 10 to 1) so students wait in line for their turn to take part in an interview. Each student normally takes part in at least three interviews, moving from one table to another after finishing an interview. At the same time, multiple event "mentors" move around the room, providing an opportunity for students to ask advice or practice their "pitch" whilst they are waiting for their turn to speak with an employer. At the end of the hour, the structured part of the event ends, although many students and employers choose to remain for longer. This additional time is spent in further conversation, with students reaching out to additional employers, following up on earlier interviews with a particular employer or chatting with other students and mentors. In all, the events normally last between two hours and two and a half an hour.

Although we are not aware of any studies evaluating the effect of an intervention such as this one, research suggests that even small amounts of contact between students and employers can be beneficial for students' employability. For example, Kashfekdel and Percy (2017) found that participating in career talks in high school is associated with an earning premium at age 26 (after controlling for students' socio-demographic background and learning attainment) and that additional career talks lead to larger premiums, presumably because each speaker conveys different insights. Additionally, Percy and Mann (2014) found that students with multiple employer contacts during their school year achieved higher salaries at age 19–24 than did their peers who did not engage with employers during their school years. Below, we outline three theoretical frameworks which can explain how event-based engagement with employers could support students' employability.

1.1 Theories explaining the mechanisms underpinning student employability interventions

1.1.1 Goal setting theory. One explanation for the beneficial effects of student engagement with employers is that it gives young people first-hand insight into the labour market and in

so doing, raises, broadens and informs their career aspirations (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). Goal-setting research (Kleingeld *et al.*, 2011; Locke, 2002; Locke and Latham, 1990) finds that setting specific and difficult, but achievable, goals improves performance. The beneficial effects of goal-setting have been found to extend to the career domain, with graduates and workers who engage in career goal setting subsequently experiencing greater career success (Abele and Spurk, 2009; Chang Boon Lee, 2002; Ng *et al.*, 2005). The positive effect of goal-setting on performance occurs because goals help to direct behaviour, increase effort and persistence and generate strategies (Locke and Latham, 1990). Students commonly report a lack of information about career paths and the world of work more generally (Kulcsár *et al.*, 2020) which makes it difficult for them to develop specific career goals. However, event-based engagement with employers gives students the opportunity to learn directly from employers about the type of work that is available within their field and the skills needed in that field, thereby helping them to develop more specific and aspirational career goals. This proposition is supported by research finding that students with mentors who provided role-modelling, counselling, friendship and advice developed higher quality (difficult, specific and committed) career goals (Greco and Kraimer, 2020). Our first proposition was that structured, event-based engagement with employers could support students' employability by helping to focus their career goals:

P1. Students' career goals will become more specific and challenging after taking part in event-based engagement with employers

1.1.2 Self-efficacy theory. Alternatively, event-based engagement with employers could support students' employability by strengthening their career self-efficacy (Hughes *et al.*, 2016). Self-efficacy is a cognitive appraisal or judgement of future performance capabilities linked to a distinct realm of functioning (Bandura, 1997). Individuals with high self-efficacy beliefs set higher goals for themselves, exert more effort, and persist longer on a difficult task (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Patricio-Gamboa *et al.*, 2021). In the employment domain, career self-efficacy has been found to be a strong predictor of career choices (Arghode *et al.*, 2021; Betz and Hackett, 1981) and career outcomes such as salary achieved and career satisfaction (Abele and Spurk, 2009; Betz *et al.*, 1999, 2006; Komarraju *et al.*, 2014). Career self-efficacy is concerned with the belief that one can perform the behaviours (e.g. self-appraisal, goal selection, planning and problem solving) required for career success (Betz and Hackett, 2006). Even short contact with employers (working with industry in small blocks of time on a 9-day project) has been found to improve students' self-efficacy (Doolan *et al.*, 2019). Taking part in mini-interviews with employers should give students a sense of authentic mastery, which is known to have a powerful effect on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2002; Usher and Pajares, 2006; Wilson *et al.*, 2020). Self-efficacy is also strengthened through modelling (observation and social comparison (Tucker and McCarthy, 2000) and the events also allow students to observe other students, like themselves, taking part in the interviews. Thus, our second proposition was that:

P2. Students' career self-efficacy will be higher after taking part in event-based engagement with employers.

1.1.3 Social capital theory. Social capital theory has also been used to explain how engagement with employers supports student employability (Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Hughes *et al.*, 2016; Inceoglu *et al.*, 2019). Social capital is reflected in the quality and extent of an individual's relationships (Ostrom, 2009). Social capital creates value and assists individuals to achieve their goals by providing new relationships and through this, new information channels and opportunities (Coleman, 1988). For example, engagement in networking activities builds relationships that students can use to access resources such as information, career advice and task related support (Batistic and Tymon, 2017; Chollet *et al.*, 2021). In the longer term,

engagement in networking behaviour has also been found to explain variation in salaries achieved and rate of career progression (Wolf and Moser, 2009). Therefore, one means through which structured, event-based engagement with employers might support student employability is by building their professional network and thereby providing access to a wider range of resources and information to support of their career goals. Drawing from social capital theory, our third proposition was that:

- P3. Students will be able to identify more actions for achieving their career goals after taking part in event-based engagement with employers.

1.2 Study approach

This study explores whether structured, event-based engagement with employers can provide an efficient means of supporting student employability by helping to focus their career goals, strengthen their career self-efficacy and build their social capital so that they are better able to achieve their career goals. To test the three propositions, we carried out interviews with students before and after they took part in structured, event-based engagement with employers. Three questions were asked in both interviews so that we could explore whether the proposed effects on career goals, self-efficacy and social capital were observed:

- (1) Do you have any employment goals or a career plan, and if so, what are they?
- (2) If 0 is not at all confident and 100 is totally confident, how confident are you that you can achieve your employment goals?
- (3) What steps are you taking to further your employment goals or your chances of finding study-related employment at the completion of your course?

The study propositions were tested by comparing students' responses to these questions before and after the event. Specifically, we examined whether their career-goals became more specific and challenging (P1), their career self-efficacy was strengthened (P2) and whether students could identify more steps to achieve their career goals (P3) after taking part in the event.

However, as this was the first study to explore the effect of an event of this type, we included two exploratory questions in the second interview. That is, in the interview carried out after the event, we began by asking students:

- (1) What outcomes (positive or negative) did you experienced from taking part in the Ribit [1] process and the speed networking event?
- (2) What was it about the experience that contributed to these outcomes?

By including these extra questions, we allowed students to define the effect of the event in their own words in case they experienced alternative outcomes (unrelated to goal-setting, self-efficacy or social capital). We also sought to determine whether students would describe ways in which the event process had influenced their goal-setting, self-efficacy or social capital without prompting, since this would provide further support for our propositions.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample of 49 students who attended an event and took part in both interviews comprised 32 males and 17 females. This sample size is large compared to other qualitative studies in this field (Belwal *et al.*, 2020; Fouad *et al.*, 2008; Laughland-Booÿ *et al.*, 2017; McMullan *et al.*, 2018;

Reddy and Shaw, 2019), especially considering that each participant was interviewed twice. Nearly all of these students were studying a degree or combined degree including IT, Commerce, Software Engineering, Business, or Finance. The high proportion of male students taking part in the study is representative of male-dominated enrolments in these fields of study. A small number of students were completing a vocational rather than a university qualification ($n = 2$). Nearly two-thirds of the students reported that they already had some work experience relevant to their field of study.

2.2 Procedure

The structured events were facilitated by [ribit.net](#) (referred to hereafter as “Ribit”), an Australian online job-matching platform. Ribit provides an online jobs and internships platform to match higher-education and VET students (with digital and STEM skills) to innovative companies who need these skills. To complement the online platform, Ribit organises “speed-networking events” in partnership with tertiary education providers, government, start-up accelerators and student associations. Each event is tailored for employers from a specific sector and students from fields of study that are relevant for the internships being offered by these employers. Ribit uses a range of channels to recruit students for events. They send invitations for events out to university heads of schools, promote events to student societies, provide promotional materials to lecturers and careers advisers and use the Ribit Facebook group for students.

We recruited participants for this study from three Ribit events, each held in a different city. The event in Sydney was hosted by a FinTech innovation hub and the employers were mostly start-ups working in the FinTech domain. The Brisbane event was broader in focus, attracting a more generalist group of small to medium enterprises, including start-ups. The Adelaide event was run in collaboration with a Cybersecurity Growth Centre and targeted students and employers working in the defence and cybersecurity sectors. Students who had registered to attend one of the three events were sent an email informing them about the research project. The email contained a link to the research information sheet which explained that the purpose of the research was to investigate how structured event-based engagement with employers might affect students’ employability and employment goals. They were also told that if they took part in both interviews, they would be given a double movie pass in return for their time and input. Students were asked to notify the event organiser if they did not want their contact details to be shared with the research team (9 students chose not to be contacted by the research team). The Ribit team then passed on the contact details for 275 students who had registered for the three events.

The researchers successfully reached 141 students by telephone ahead of the first event and 82 of these students (58%) agreed to take part in the first interview. Of the 82 students who took part in the first interview, only 68 attended the event. This smaller sample of students were then contacted in the week following the event (usually by the same researcher who conducted their first interview) and invited to take part in a second interview. In total, 55 students elected to participate in the second interview, representing 39% of the students who were originally contacted and invited to take part in the research (see [Table 1](#)). The final response rate varied from 22% (Sydney participants) to 27% (Brisbane participants) to 38% (Adelaide participants). However, six of these students were not included in the final sample because the quality of the interview recordings was too poor for transcription. Consequently, our final sample for analysis represented 49 students. The timing of the interviews varied according to students’ availability but all interviews were carried out within seven days of the event, both before and after the event.

The interviews were structured, with the researchers using an interview protocol to ensure that the process was consistent (see [Appendix](#)). Both interviews took between ten and

twenty minutes to complete. In the first interview we captured students' background information (e.g., age, course of study, year of expected completion, prior paid work or volunteer work) and in the second interview we asked students what outcomes (positive or negative) they had experienced from the event and how the event process contributed to these outcomes. Since this was the first study to evaluate structured event-based engagement with employers, we wanted to identify any outcomes or processes that students considered relevant rather than simply testing propositions based on prior research.

Next, to test our three study propositions directly, three questions were posed in both the first and the second interview:

- (1) Do you have any employment goals or a career plan, and if so, what are they?
- (2) If 0 is not at all confident and 100 is totally confident, how confident are you that you can achieve your employment goals?
- (3) What steps are you taking to further your employment goals or your chances of finding study-related employment at the completion of your course?

Although psychological constructs such as self-efficacy are typically measured using a written, Likert scale (which has descriptive anchors for different response options), we chose to use a 0 to 100 scale because it was more intuitive and therefore simpler to explain verbally.

A few questions were added to the interviews at the request of the event organisers including who their ideal employer would be, how they would describe their skills and experience, what additional support they would like to help them achieve their career goals, and what aspects of the event they found most valuable. We did not include their responses to these questions in our analyses.

2.3 Analysis

The interviews were analysed in NVivo using a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Grbich, 2007). The deductive coding was carried out on students' responses to the first question in the post-event interview, when they were asked what outcomes they gained from the event. A deductive coding approach was used for this question because our aim was to explore students' reactions without imposing a theoretical lens over their responses. The constant comparison analysis method (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008) that we employed begins with the researcher reading through the entire set of transcripts. The text is then broken into smaller, meaningful chunks that are labelled by the researcher. Finally, chunks of text that are coded similarly are grouped together to form categories and themes. Since the initial coding was carried out independently (usually by the researcher who conducted the original interview), the researchers met regularly to ensure consistency in their coding and to discuss emerging themes and concepts. When analysing the three repeated questions (each designed to reflect one of the study propositions) we adopted an inductive coding approach.

	No. of students	Response rate (%)
Original sample	285	
Did not opt out	275	
Telephoned	141	
Participated in first interview	82	58
Attended the event	68	48
Participated in second interview	55	39
Used interview in analysis	49	35

Table 1.
Participant response
rate across all events

Instead of describing the nature of their career goals, self-efficacy and social capital, we focused on how their responses changed over time and whether these responses were consistent or inconsistent with our propositions. For example, when analysing their responses to the career goals question, we compared their two answers and coded either “no change”, “more specific”, “broadened” and/or “more challenging”. Similarly, when coding their responses to the questions asking about what actions they could take to achieve their career goals, we used the codes “no change”, “fewer actions”, or “more actions”. Career-self-efficacy was measured on a rating scale, so we used a *t*-test to compare these responses. However, students whose self-efficacy had changed were asked to explain why they had changed their rating and these responses were coded to explore whether and how the event was seen to contribute to the change in self-efficacy.

3. Results

3.1 Outcomes experienced by students

We begin our description of the study findings with the analysis of students’ descriptions of event outcomes and how these outcomes were influenced by the event process. Many students described multiple outcomes (usually two or three), with the result that their answers were classified into more than one theme (see Table 2). The themes that emerged were consistent with social capital (P3) and self-efficacy (P2) theory rather than goal setting theory (P1). Supporting social capital theory, students commonly described outcomes (information, connections and job opportunities) that were gained through the relationships they developed with employers and other students at the event. In some instances, these outcomes had a flow-on effect for students’ career goals or self-efficacy but these effects only emerged when we asked students specifically about their career goals and self-efficacy later in the interview. Eighteen students also reported that the event helped to develop career-relevant skills and experience; these outcomes best align with self-efficacy theory since they represent authentic mastery experiences. Some students also reported negative outcomes (specifically, experiencing dissatisfaction or frustration with aspects of the event) but these were usually mentioned after the positive outcomes and described as less important than the positive outcomes. Below, we describe each theme in more detail.

3.1.1 Gained new, career-relevant information. Twenty-six students reported that the event had given them valuable career-relevant information. Some students reported that they now had a better understanding of what employers were looking for:

... I have learnt some of the skills and certifications required to actually go into industry and those employers told us about how to get into industry and how to do some portfolios that would actually help in your resume things like this so actually was quite helpful. (S42)

My skills in content writing are a lot more valuable than I originally thought. (S3)

Students also learned what types of job opportunities existed in the market, which organisations were likely to be able to use their skillsets, what skills they needed to develop, or what they needed to do to increase their chances of finding work:

Themes	Number of students
Gained new, career-relevant information	26
Grew my professional network	19
Developed career-relevant skills and experience	18
Gaining internships or job leads	11
Opportunities on offer not relevant for me	6

Table 2.
Themes emerging from
students’ descriptions
of event outcomes

It was good getting an idea of what start-ups were after compared to enterprise it seems like they want more kind of jack of all trades people for start-ups. So that definitely helped clear things up for me. (S25)

3.1.2 Grew my professional network. Students also described the connections they made at the event as a valuable outcome in and of itself.

Having familiarity with the person next time you see them around, there is nothing to build on yet but the next opportunity when you get to see them a second time around, networking or at a conference, that's where the real relationship building gets started because you have the context now . . . a couple I hope to build on. I hope to get in touch with them again. It is obvious in the networking [if] you are just not the right fit for them, it's . . . I have one who I contacted straight after the event and passed on my CV through LinkedIn and still in conversation and hopefully that ends up into something. (S17)

Students also valued the connections they made with other students at the event since they could share information with them and form part of their professional network.

. . . I could talk to them about what their goals are about, what their plans are and learn from them and I can talk with them about my plans and they can change my perspective or help me. (S14)

3.1.3 Developed career-relevant skills and experience. Eighteen students reported that the event had improved their career relevant skills and experience. The types of skills and experience that they gained ranged from learning how to network with employers, learning how to “sell themselves” to employers, learning what an interview is like and gaining practice at answering interview questions.

. . . you really had to know and be prepared and sell yourself, I found [that] a very helpful practice. In all it was really good practice because I've never done interviews before, face-to-face interviews that were really interesting and good experience. (S1)

3.1.4 Dissatisfaction (due to length of queues, noise, crowding). Eighteen students reported experiencing some dissatisfaction with aspects of the event organisation, in particular, the time they spent waiting in line to speak with employers relative to the time they spent actually talking with employers.

. . . more than half of my time I just spent standing in a queue because some people actually took a lot more time . . . so some companies, because they're very interesting or because they offered really interesting job prospects, people kind of had a lot of questions people took a little longer time . . . everyone . . . if everyone stuck to the 5 minute rule I think it would have been fine . . . (S8)

For most of these students, the dissatisfaction was outweighed by the positives. They would have preferred having fewer students or more employers at each event. However, for four of the students the time spent waiting meant that the event had not been worthwhile for them (we note that some of these students were the ones who reported that their field of study was not a good match for the types of employers at the event). Two students reported that the noise and crowds at the event meant they could not participate on an equal basis, one because she was not extroverted and the other because she was hearing impaired.

3.1.5 Gaining internships or job leads. Eleven students reported that they were hoping to (or had already gained) a follow-up interview or internship from the event. It is worth noting that even the students who had secured an internship or interview did not always identify this as the most important outcome that they gained from the event, as the following quote reveals:

It was really good, the fact there was over 8 to 12 employers were there, it was a real eye opener, what was even better was over six of them were in my field of interest, marketing . . . I learnt a lot from a lot of the mentors, I spoke to a lot of people there and the way marketing works and all of that, it is such a

broad field and I spoke to a lot of specialists which really broadened my knowledge as well and furthermore today I got an email and I've got an interview on Thursday. (S20)

3.1.6 Opportunities on offer not relevant for me. Six students expressed some disappointment because they felt that the internship opportunities and the types of employers at the event were not relevant for them. Either their skills and training were not relevant for the employers represented at the event or their citizenship was a barrier to the employment that was on offer. However, only one of these six students experienced no positive outcomes from the event; the remaining five felt that they had still gained useful information, experience or contacts from the event that made it worthwhile.

So for positives I got a chance to talk with employers and practice communicating interview style and networking with other students as well and employers. Negative—so a lot of start-ups looking for people who are more experienced . . . It was much more tech based than I expected. So more related to study of STEM than my commerce degree. (S7)

3.1.7 No positive or negative outcomes from the event. Finally, one student stated that he did not experience any positive or negative outcomes from the event. His focus seemed to be on finding a job and in this respect, he did not see the event as any more effective than responding to job advertisements:

No positive impact or negative impact, just very normal. Maybe I can say this kind of event cannot increase the probability to get a job rather than the advertisement . . . There is no difference for the event or the online advertisement, they all follow their own rule, that's the case. (S48)

3.2 How the event process supported these outcomes

To understand what aspects of the event process supported these outcomes, a follow-up question was asked: "What was it about the experience that contributed to these outcomes?" Students' answers to this question were consistent with social capital theory. Students spoke most about the number, variety and quality of the employers at the event. The variety of employers at the event was important because it gave them insight into the range of opportunities that were available and enlarged their thinking about potential career pathways:

Previously [I] thought only one company relevant to my experience, actually found nearly half of the companies were relevant for me . . . (S11)

However, the "quality" of the employers was also important. Students valued that the employers were "approachable", willing to answer students' questions or that they seemed genuinely interested in talking with them. Students who found the event less beneficial also attributed this to the employers represented at the event. Some students reported that there were not enough employers at the event who were interested in someone with their qualifications or in course of study:

. . . coming from an accounting background I felt there were a limited amount of opportunities available. Not necessarily that I was expecting there to be a plethora of them but I felt there were extremely limited amounts. (S33)

Nearly half of the students mentioned the importance of practicing networking, answering questions and selling themselves to employers.

I got some experience with interviews which is really nice since I've never been in an interview so that's a positive start. (S43)

Six students mentioned the support provided by the mentors at the event as valuable. They valued the opportunity to practice their pitch or gain advice about useful questions to ask in

the interview with employer. The mentors also made the time spent waiting in line more useful.

I feel more confident because I talked to some pitch doctors and some mentors about how I saw myself and gave them my spiel and they gave me some feedback on how to approach these networking events and after that [I was] more confident. (S3)

Students also mentioned the opportunity to meet a wider range of students than they normally met during their studies; students who nevertheless shared similar career aspirations.

It's good to meet a lot of people with similar backgrounds like same IT background . . . I can ask them the questions . . . how they are looking for jobs and how they prepare for interviews and also, like for example, one day we may work together and how we deal with each other maybe have more connections, more information. (S31)

3.3 Direct investigation of study propositions

Next, we compared students' descriptions of their career goals, their career self-efficacy and their steps for achieving their career goals before and after they took part in the event.

3.3.1 Change in career goals. Our first proposition was that the events would help students to develop more specific and challenging career goals. [Table 3](#) summarises how students' career goals changed over time. (P1) was not supported in that the majority of students ($N = 32$) described their career goals in the same way before and after the event. This lack of change was surprising given that many of the students did not have well-defined goals. Their goal was simply to find employment in the field that their qualification was designed to prepare them for. The following response was typical of these students:

Well, when I first graduate, I'm hoping to work in either an advertising or public relations agency and then after that I guess kind of see where my life takes me. (S27)

Apparently, the information gained from the event did not help these students focus their goals. The students who did not change their career goals also included students who had specific career goals but did not change their goals after taking part in the event.

Amongst the eighteen students whose goals did change, the nature of these changes varied. In line with our predictions, eleven students became more specific when they described their career goals

Maybe in the future I'm going to focus on front end development, that's probably my plan now . . . I found that the employers are very interested in my past experience from when I was animator and actually I think experience would help me a lot if I am planning to do front end development because front end development involves a lot of design so I think that is one of my advantages. I think that is . . . the most important reward that I got from that event. (S28)

However, six students also described their career goals more broadly after taking part in the event. From a goal-setting perspective, this change could be considered negative because specific goals are more highly correlated with performance than are broad and diffuse goals.

Coding	Number of students
No change in career goals	32
Career goals became more specific	11
Career goals broadened	6
Career goals became more challenging	1

Table 3.
Coding change in
students' descriptions
of their career goals

Yet, as the next quote indicates, students perceived value in having a better understanding of potential career paths:

I feel that Uni students are very exposed to what the larger corporations are looking for but you don't hear as much on the start-up side . . . after talking to start-ups I'm reassured they are looking for people who have a passion for what they are doing and similar values to them, which is quite similar to what the big companies are looking for . . . I feel more reassured about finding a career in a start-up. (S9)

3.3.2 Change in career self-efficacy. Our second proposition was that the event would strengthen students' career self-efficacy. Students were asked to describe how confident they were that they could achieve their career goals before and after the event, using a response scale where 0 represented "not at all confident" and 100 represented "totally confident". Three students did not feel able to choose a number and they were not included in our analyses.

To determine whether the improvement in students' career self-efficacy was significantly greater than would be expected by chance, we carried out a Wilcoxon-Signed Rank test. The test allowed us to reject the null hypothesis because we obtained a p value of 0.03, less than the significance level $\alpha = 0.05$. As predicted (P2), students' confidence was significantly higher after taking part in the event ($m_{\text{after}} = 82.5$) than it was before taking part in the event ($m_{\text{before}} = 80.0$). Figure 1 illustrates the change over time in students' self-efficacy ratings.

Students' whose self-efficacy had either increased or decreased substantially were asked to explain why their rating had changed.

Students whose confidence had increased reported that this occurred due to getting positive feedback from employers regarding their employability, having a better understanding of what they needed to do in order to find a job and learning that their skills were valued by employers.

. . . before I was kind of going with what the Uni was telling me and I don't know how other people feel but sometimes when I'm at Uni and I look at people getting jobs I wonder how do I transition this study into a job but now I kind of know what I should be doing . . . (S30)

Students whose career self-efficacy had declined were in the minority. Two of these students reported that their self-efficacy had declined because the employers at the event had not been interested in their skillsets or qualifications. Another student reported that he felt inadequate due to seeing another student with a ten-page CV. The fourth student reported that his high level of confidence prior to the event (100%) had been due to ignorance:

I guess it's when you don't know anything you're like really confident I think that's what my answer was last time . . . I didn't know anything so now I know a bit more about what I need so I am less confident. (S21)

3.3.3 Change in social capital. To explore whether the event had an impact on students' social capital (P3), we asked students to describe what steps they could take to achieve their career goals both before and after the event. Although the question asked about students' career goals, it was designed to identify the effect of social capital by revealing not only whether students could identify more steps for achieving their goals but also, whether these additional steps resulted from social connections and information that were gained from the event (see Table 4).

Approximately two-thirds of students ($N = 32$) could identify more steps for achieving their goals after taking part in the event whereas one-third ($N = 17$) had the same number of steps after the event than before the event. However, it is possible that students were able to provide a more detailed response simply because they were hearing the question for a second time. For this reason, we explored whether the new steps could be tied to information or connections that were gained from the event. Although we did not ask students to explain

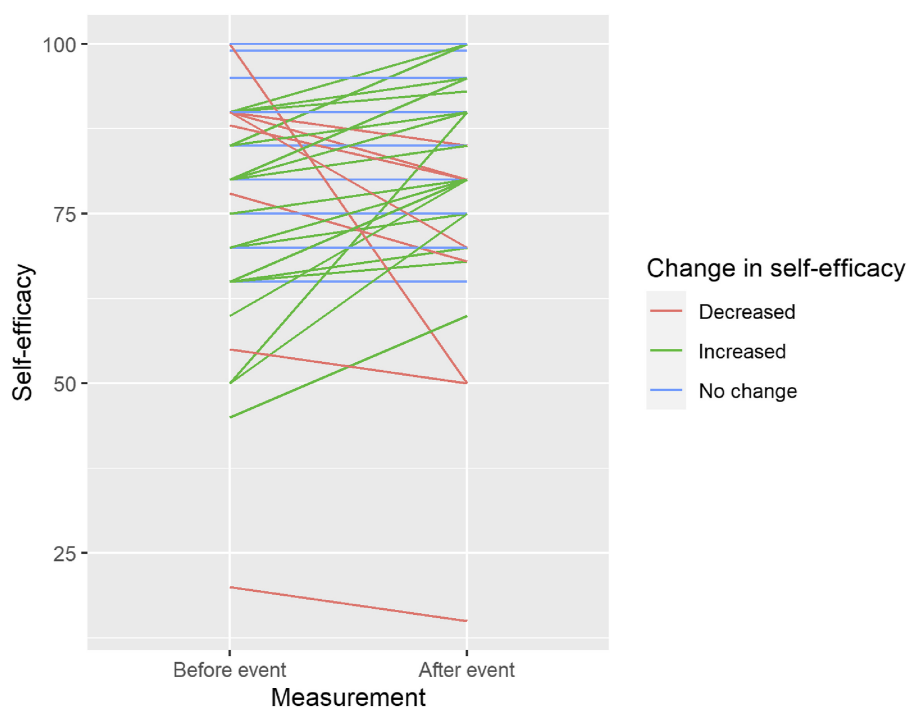


Figure 1. Students' career self-efficacy ratings before and after taking part in the event

Coding	Number of students
New steps for achieving career goals identified but not explicitly connected to the event	19
No change to steps for achieving career goals	17
New steps for achieving career goals based on information gained from the event	12
New steps for achieving career goals involving social connections gained from the event	4

Table 4. Investigating social capital effects

why they had identified additional steps, thirteen students provided sufficient information for us to ascertain that one or more of the new steps they described derived from a connection that they had made with an employer at the event.

Seven students reported that they were taking new actions to achieve their career goals because employers had helped them to identify specific skills, qualifications or work experience opportunities that would improve their employability. For example:

... so I've sent emails to my course coordinators ... to talk about the honours year because I have to apply for that so that would well according to all the people the employers I spoke to would pretty much increase my chances of employment ... (S30)

Other students were planning to explore work experience opportunities that they had learned about at the event:

So the defence guy he suggested, there was this thing about pre-employment industry kind of placement thing ... it's kind of like an internship so like a cadetship ... so I guess I'm going to explore those options further and just see. (S44)

Some students were adopting new steps because of information they had gained regarding effective job search strategies:

... many of the employers mentioned they preferred LinkedIn so I will be more active on LinkedIn ... (S46)

In other instances, students were planning to follow up with connections from the event that might lead to work opportunities:

... well one of the employers from the event that wanted me to email them afterwards I've got in touch with them ... Aside from that I have another person that I have to email a resume to in the next couple of days, so I'll do that ... Otherwise, same as before, just keep meeting people and stay up to date with what's happening in the industry. (S29)

In other words, without prompting, thirteen students mentioned that the new steps they were taking to support their career goals derived from the conversations they had with employers, thus illustrating the effect of social capital gained from the event.

4. Discussion

This study reveals the potential to support student employability through structured events that allow students to participate in brief job interviews with multiple employers. We found that participation in these events was associated with improvements in students' social capital (P2) and career self-efficacy (P3). Our proposition that the events would also assist students to develop more specific and challenging career goals (P1) was not supported. Whilst we observed improvements in both students' social capital and self-efficacy after taking part in the event, it was the connections, information and career-relevant experience that students focused on when asked what outcomes they gained from the event.

4.1 Theoretical implications

This study represents the first of its kind. We are not aware of any other studies that have explored the potential to support student employability through large-scale events that connect students and employers via multiple, short job interviews. Nor are we aware of other studies that have explored change in students' career goals, career self-efficacy and social capital concurrently. Students' accounts of the event process support [Fugate et al.'s \(2004\)](#) proposition that the component dimensions of employability are grounded in reciprocal determinism. Their accounts mostly illustrate the effect of social capital on career self-efficacy. Students reported that their increased self-efficacy came about because of the information and positive feedback they received through interacting with employers. One student attributed her improved self-efficacy to her interpersonal skills, which allowed her to build rapport with the employers more easily. She understood the value of these skills more after seeing how other students, with less strong interpersonal skills, failing to build the same rapport with employers at the event. In her story we can see pre-existing human capital enabling her to derive more social capital from the event, in turn affecting her self-efficacy and career identity.

We should not infer from these findings that self-efficacy does not affect social capital. The students who attended these events represented a small proportion of the total number of students enrolled in relevant degrees at local educational institutions. In addition, two-thirds of these students already had some prior work experience relevant to their field of study. Prior research suggests that students who participate in voluntary career development activities tend to be more confident, well-connected and career-savvy ([Higgins and Kram, 2001](#); [Ibarra, 1993](#); [Trope and Neter, 1994](#)). It is possible that students with higher career self-efficacy are also more likely to participate in the events that we studied, providing an example of career

self-efficacy facilitating improvement in students' social capital. Having captured preliminary evidence which suggests that these events are beneficial for students, further research is needed to determine whether all students benefit from such events or whether the effects that we observed are, like most voluntary student employability interventions, primarily benefiting already advantaged students.

Although goal-setting theory is extremely well-validated, this study suggests that it is not useful for explaining the value of structured, event-based engagement with employers. There are two reasons why goal-setting theory might not be relevant for understanding the value of these events. First, the events represent a very short-term intervention. Even though many of the students did not have well-developed goals, an experience that lasts for only two hours does not provide a strong basis from which to decide something as important as one's career goals. Second, a significant number of the students ($N = 6$) developed broader (rather than more specific) career goals. From a goal-setting perspective, broader goals are less effective than specific goals but students clearly valued having more ideas about desirable career paths. There is some evidence to suggest that students and graduates benefit from having diverse career goals that allow them to adapt to changing conditions and emerging opportunities (Winters, 2012). We infer that whilst specific goals can improve performance, it is not appropriate for students to commit to focused career goals before they have captured sufficient information to determine which career path is likely to suit them best.

This study also provides naturalistic descriptions of social capital at work, illustrating the way in which social capital builds self-efficacy and supports individuals to achieve their career goals. Social capital is reflected in the number and depth of relationships between people but it creates value because these relationships connect the relevant individuals with information and opportunities (Coleman, 1988). Most social capital research relies on survey data which measures the number and quality of social connections that individuals have and relates these to various career outcomes (Gubbins and Garavan, 2016; Lin and Huang, 2005; e.g., Seibert *et al.*, 2001). In this study, we asked students what steps they could take to achieve their career goals, comparing their responses before and after the event. By adopting this approach, we were able to obtain examples of the ways in which new social connections provided students with information and opportunities that they could use to advance their career goals. The study therefore illustrates the mechanisms through which shallow ties developed from a well-structured event can support career outcomes. Based on students' descriptions of the event process and its outcomes, we propose a model of the mechanisms through which structured, event-based engagement with employers can support students' employability (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Mechanisms through which event-based engagement with employers was seen to support students' employability

4.2 Practical implications

There have been numerous calls for employability interventions that address disadvantages for less well-connected students by broadening students' social capital and networks (Atkinson, 2016; Chin *et al.*, 2019; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Torii, 2018). Structured, event-based engagement with employers provides an efficient and equitable means of supporting student employability. Importantly, the internships on offer to students were paid and the events were advertised to students from multiple educational institutions, both universities and vocational education and training providers. This model reduces the impost on education providers and ensures that the opportunities on offer are available to students, irrespective of the institution they study in. In addition, there was no cost to students associated with attending the event, reducing financial barriers to participation.

The feedback from students offers guidance as to the event characteristics that facilitate these outcomes. When asked how the event process contributed to their outcomes, students spoke about the opportunity to meet, ask questions and practice answering interview questions with a variety of employers. It was important that these employers were interested in hiring people with skillsets like their own and could therefore provide relevant information and feedback to students. Other research has confirmed that students experience greater value from learning activities that provide the opportunity to interact meaningfully with professionals (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). The fact that employers were supportive, helpful and gave encouragement to students was also something that many students valued and mentioned. However, students who felt that their qualification and skills were not relevant for the employers at the event sometimes experienced decreased, rather than increased confidence. It is clearly important to match students with employers who offer career opportunities that are relevant to their field of study and career goals. The feedback from students also suggests that employers should be briefed ahead of the event to ensure that they focus not only on filling an internship position but also on providing support to students in their field. Students also appreciated the mentors at the event, who were available for students to talk with whilst they waited in line to speak with the employers. The value of the mentors and the guidance they provided at these events is consistent with prior research which finds that supportive mentors enhance the value that students gained from internships (Knouse and Fontenot, 2008). Finally, students appreciated the opportunity to make connections with other students studying in their field and share job search strategies with them.

A small minority of students reported that the event had been a negative experience for them. Their negative reactions appeared to stem from existing barriers to employment, namely, having a disability, being very introverted, not speaking English fluently and citizenship issues. It is important to ensure that existing disadvantages are not compounded by inviting students to participate in events that are unsuitable for them. To support employability, there must be a variety of channels and opportunities through which students can interact with employers—no one approach will suit all students. In addition, any marketing and communications associated with the events should be designed to set appropriate expectations. Our research suggests that students need information about the format of the event, the types of employers who will be attending and any qualification or eligibility requirements associated with the internships on offer. In addition, it will be important to communicate the more intangible benefits associated with the event. These benefits include the opportunity to grow their professional network, to gain information about job opportunities, to understand what skills and experience employers are looking for and to develop skills and confidence in communicating with employers. With this information, students are better placed to determine whether the event will be beneficial for them and what outcomes they can expect to gain from it.

A secondary benefit of the events was that they created an opportunity for start-ups and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) to connect with students who could assist with short-term projects. Start-ups and SMEs tend to have fewer resources to support the administrative costs of managing student placements and they are also less well known to students, making it harder for them to access the graduate recruitment market on the same basis as large employers (McIlveen and Pensiero, 2008). The event organisers worked with start-up hubs to identify start-ups and SMEs who had projects that would benefit from access to students from specific fields of study. By creating the opportunity for them to engage students with skills relevant to their work, they improved access to talent for this group of businesses (Piterou and Birch, 2014) whilst improving students' awareness of the potential benefits of working with start-ups and SMEs.

4.3 Limitations and directions for further research

It is important to acknowledge that we cannot draw causal inferences from this small, qualitative study. Without a control group, we cannot know whether the improved self-efficacy and social capital resulted from other factors, including the research interviews themselves. Quantitative research with a larger sample and a randomised control group is needed to provide more rigorous evidence of the effects that we observed. It would also be useful to determine whether the effects on students' self-efficacy and social capital are retained over the longer term. The study suggests that students who take part in the events will be more confident, make more informed career choices, and have more strategies and connections through which to identify employment opportunities. A longer-term follow-up study is needed to investigate whether students who take part in these events find work in their desired field more quickly and experience greater satisfaction with their employment situation than do students who do not take part in these events.

Another issue that should be addressed through further research is whether these events are successful in supporting employability for all students. The fact that this event offered paid work experience opportunities means that it has the potential to address inequalities associated with unpaid internships (which students from low socio-economic backgrounds cannot afford to participate in). However, the events should be promoted broadly (to reach less engaged students) and not just as a pathway to internships but also as an opportunity to build confidence, connections and experience in a low-stakes and supportive environment. Once the communications strategy is in place, further research is needed to determine how (if at all) students who participate in structured, event-based engagement with employers differ from those who choose not to participate in these events. It would also be useful to investigate whether certain students (e.g., those whose professional networks lack breadth) benefit more from participation in these events.

4.4 Conclusion

The potential to support students' employability through large-scale event-based engagement with employers is exciting. Events that allow large numbers of students to practice short interviews with multiple employers (towards matching students to paid internships) offer benefits for the employers who participate in the event since they gain access to the pipeline of graduate talent. These benefits are important to gain employers' involvement. More importantly, the events provide a practical and efficient means for students to gain valuable information, connections and experience whilst also strengthening their career self-efficacy. Structured, event-based engagement with employers therefore represents an important addition to the ecosystem of career service provision and work-integrated learning.

Note

1. Ribit is the name of the organisation that organised the structured events for students and employers.

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A. Background questions (these questions were only asked in the interview before the event):

I'd like to start by getting some background information about you if that is OK . . .

What is your gender?

How old are you?

What course are you studying?

What year do you expect to complete your course?

Have you done any paid or voluntary work experience so far?

Was it relevant to your course of study?

B. Exploring student perceptions of event outcomes (these questions were only asked in the interview after the event):

My first question is a fairly general one. I'm interested in hearing what outcomes (positive or negative) you experienced from taking part in the Ribit process and the speed networking event?

What was it about the experience that contributed to these outcomes?

C. Testing study propositions (questions asked both interviews)

We're interested in understanding what impact the Ribit event has on students' career goals and understanding of their employability.

Do you have any employment goals or a career plan, and if so, what are they?

[Prompt if they say no: Do you have any ideas about the type of work you'd like to be doing, or the type of organisation you'd like to be working in over the next few years?]

If 0 is "not at all confident" and 100 is "totally confident", how confident are you that you can achieve your career goals?

What steps are you taking to further your employment goals or your chances of finding study-related employment at the completion of your course?

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