

The Employability Dividend of Community Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract

Teaching and learning, research, and community engagement are recognised pillars of scholarship in higher education. However, graduate employability has also emerged (amongst others) as a further strategic policy priority in higher education in response to widening skills gaps and rising graduate unemployment. In this milieu, higher education is coming under pressure to ensure that graduates are relevant to the workplace and prepared for it. In line with UNESCO's framing of higher education as a public good and a driver of sustainable development, this paper examines the relevance of Community Engagement (CE) as a lever enhancing graduate employability. The study builds on established principles from four conceptual frameworks: human capital theory, social capital theory, motivation-based theory, and signalling theory, which emphasise human capital development through (engaged) learning. Using a triangulated research design, the study examines national and global labour market trends, survey data from 97 academic staff, and qualitative insights from 11 senior industry professionals across Business, Information Technology, Law, Architecture, and Engineering who have a direct role in recruitment. The analysis addresses four policy-relevant objectives: the extent to which employers consider CE in recruitment; its employability value; alignment between academic and employer expectations; and the institutional implications for curriculum and programme design. The findings explore the alignment between academics' opinions of CE relevance and employers' perceptions of employability. While academics held strong views on the significance of CE for gradueness, this view was not shared by industry respondents interviewed. Employers, however, confirmed a significant secondary value of CE. Higher education institutions globally, and South African higher education institutions specifically, are mandated by global and local policy imperatives to advance CE. If employers continue not to recognise it in recruitment, the employability return on this mandate diminishes, weakening incentives for students to participate meaningfully in CE projects. The paper concludes with a commentary

on the limitations that arise when employers omit to consider CE, for example, by failing to detect non-technical competencies such as leadership, communication, and teamwork, and by missing signals of prosocial motivation and organisational potential.

Keywords

Community Engagement, Employability, Recruitment, Higher Education, Curriculum Renewal, Industry Voices

1. Introduction

Recruitment and selection processes are intended to identify job-relevant competence and predict performance, retention, and organisational fit. Yet many capabilities that employers claim to value, such as initiative, leadership, ethical orientation, collaboration, and stakeholder sensitivity, are difficult to infer and measure from formal qualifications alone. Consequently, a mismatch often occurs between what employers require of new graduates and what they infer graduates can offer based on the selection process (Steurer et al., 2023: p. 49). As Steurer et al. (2023: p. 49) note, “Industry’s quarrel with the suitability of new graduates is often less about their technical skills and more about their non-technical abilities.” Community engagement (CE) can serve as a proxy for these “whole person” attributes and is frequently promoted as an enhancer of employability.

For the purposes of this study, CE referred to structured, institutionally supported activities through which students apply their disciplinary knowledge and skills in partnership with external community stakeholders to address mutually identified real-world social or developmental challenges. It was specifically distinguished from volunteering (which is typically informal and unassessed) and from corporate social responsibility (CSR), which refers to corporate/business organisational activities rather than practice linked to higher education. However, in this study, volunteerism and CSR case studies and examples are used when discussing CE because they illuminate related forms of pro-social action, stakeholder engagement, and social responsibility, even though they originate in different institutional contexts. Their inclusion serves several analytical purposes in research on CE.

Firstly, there is conceptual overlap among CE, volunteerism, and CSR as all three involve activities directed toward social benefit, community partnership, and responsiveness to societal needs. Skills frequently associated with volunteering and CSR (teamwork, ethical reasoning, communication, stakeholder engagement, and service orientation) are also central to CE projects. CSR and volunteering examples, therefore, help demonstrate the transferable competencies and values that CE may cultivate.

Secondly, empirical evidence on employability outcomes is more developed in the volunteerism and CSR literature than in CE research. Field experiments and

labour-market studies examining volunteer experience on CVs provide useful proxy evidence for understanding how employers interpret signals of pro-social engagement and soft skills.

Thirdly, drawing on volunteerism and CSR research helps situate CE within a broader ecosystem of civic and social responsibility practices spanning higher education, civil society, and the corporate sector. This comparative perspective strengthens the argument that CE is not merely a civic activity but also a developmental mechanism for cultivating competencies that organisations increasingly value.

In short, volunteerism and CSR examples are used not because they are identical to CE, but because they provide complementary theoretical insights, empirical evidence, and contextual relevance that help explain the potential employability value of community engagement.

Employability refers to the graduate attributes that enable graduates to secure employment and to transfer their professional skills into the workplace (Marais & Van Rensburg, 2024; Holmes, 2013). Graduates often include CE on their CVs for this reason, demonstrating their commitment to social and civic responsibility and the qualities and attributes developed during CE projects. Yet it remains unclear whether employers systematically consider CE in recruitment and selection decisions, and whether they value CE with the same seriousness of purpose as higher education institutions. This research examines whether CE influences employers' staff recruitment decisions, especially involving new graduates.

South Africa's higher education and policy frameworks emphasise CE as a core institutional mandate (Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024). Higher education institutions are expected to produce socially responsive graduates (DHET White Paper 3, 1997) aligned with UNESCO's mission of higher education as a public good (UNESCO, 1999). The National Development Plan (NDP 2030, 2011) foregrounds active citizenship and social cohesion. In South Africa, the Preamble to the DHET White Paper 3 *A Programme for Transformation of Higher Education* (1997) reflects specifically on the unmatched obligation of higher education, "which has not been adequately fulfilled, to help lay the foundation of a critical civil society, ... It has much to do, both within its own institutions in the influence on the broader community, to strengthen the democratic ethos, the sense of common citizenship and commitment to a common good." Section 1.27.8 (Goals) commits to higher education institutions needing "[t]o promote and develop social responsibility and awareness among students of the role of higher education in social and economic development through community service programmes (DHET, White Paper 3: GOALS).

2. Discussion and Literature Review

As stated earlier, employers face persistent challenges in identifying candidates who possess not only technical competence but also transferable skills, ethical orientation, and social responsiveness, which are not easily captured by formal qual-

ifications alone. As noted by [Bisschoff and Massyn \(2023: p. 57\)](#), these skills and attributes are critical for businesses to remain sustainable in today's corporate environment. Research suggests that CE can develop and demonstrate many of these skills that are otherwise difficult to evidence, particularly for early-career applicants. In this regard, the analysis by [Bisschoff & Massyn \(2023: pp. 66-67\)](#) demonstrates significant overlap between the skills associated with CE and the attributes associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR); yet CE remains a lesser (or nil) focus in selection and recruitment processes.

When selection systems ignore community engagement entirely, employers risk underestimating capabilities such as leadership, teamwork, initiative, communication, and service orientation, all of which are skills central to performance generally and CSR potential specifically but imperfectly captured by grades or job titles. [The White Paper 3 \(DHET, 1997\)](#) explicitly links community engagement to pro-social orientation, engagement-related outcomes, and civic responsibility, and this is confirmed in available research ([Mtawa, 2019](#); [Turin et al., 2023](#); [Palmer-Wackerly et al., 2014](#); [Da Cruz, 2017](#)). In addition to CSR capability, jobs that specifically require social-facing competencies (client service, sales, public service, stakeholder management) that fail to consider CE may narrow the information base used to predict performance, pushing selection toward easily measured but incomplete proxies.

Pressured for appropriate skills ([WEF, 2016](#); [Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024](#)), employers began to emphasise the need for "soft skills" as key graduate attributes linked to workplace relevance. Yet, research shows that existing employability capital frameworks continue to overlook capabilities in CSR, such as ethical decision-making, communication, identification and problem-solving, networking and engaging stakeholders, collaboration, offering social support, participating positively in teams, continuous learning, care, willingness to help, and leadership ([Bisschoff & Massyn, 2023: pp. 57 & 66-67](#)). These skills are also inherent in CE.

Further, if an employer promotes itself as a purpose-driven, socially responsible enterprise yet does not value community engagement in hiring, it can undermine its authenticity, creating a misalignment between its stated culture and its selection signals. The effect may be an unintended diminution of interest and attraction among candidates who prioritise social impact. This is especially true of Generation Z employees, who by 2025 will represent 27% of the global workforce ([CSR Jobs, 2025](#)). Real consideration must be given to the fact that 1) almost 90% of this workforce emphasise a desire for companies to act in a socially responsible way and prioritise diversity and inclusion; and 2) Gen Z prospective employees are willing to make personal sacrifices to work for organisations that match their values ([Psico-Smart Blog, 2024](#); [Palmer, 2024](#)). For employers competing to attract the best young talent, social responsibility has become a key priority for their employer brand. For recruiters, the message is clear: invest in people who will drive real change, hire professionals who understand social responsibility, communi-

cate honestly, and can bridge the gap between corporate and social justice imperatives (CSR Jobs, 2025).

2.1. Conceptual Frameworks Influencing Employability

The inherent value of CE as a consideration in employability and selection is discussed using four conceptual frameworks.

Human capital theory posits that individuals accumulate productive skills through both formal education and experience, which may yield additional returns in the labour market (Becker, 1993; Mayilyan & Yadigaryan, 2022; Akhtar & Amin, 2025). In presenting the theory, Becker advocated that people behave rationally when investing in their human capital, weighing the cost of education against the anticipated benefits in future earnings (Becker, 1993; Awu et al., 2025). This includes skills and competencies beyond formal education, described as soft skills, critical thinking, and adaptability. “In a globalized economy, human capital theory becomes even more critical.” (Awu et al., 2025: p. 370) Describing the effect of human capital theory, Coleman (1988: p. 100) states, “... human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways.” The underpinning ideas in workforce development and labour economics are that individuals can and should invest in their own human capital (Awu et al., 2025: p. 370).

CE may be framed as a site for acquiring skills, particularly soft or transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and leadership. CE activities may inculcate and/or enhance communication, project management, leadership, and problem-solving skills, which are not specific to the student’s study programme. Empirical research in psychology and education highlights structured volunteering and CE as opportunities to develop important competencies, such as self-efficacy, confidence, and adaptability. It also supports mental health and well-being (Oubiña López & Gómez Baya, 2025). Expanding the discussion, Krishnavika (2024) stresses that while these skills add value, are transferable to employment, and must be relevant for early-career entrants applying for positions, human capital explanations alone cannot account for observed labour market returns to CE, particularly when the skills gained are not formally certified. This is something universities should pay attention to, especially as digital badging and micro credentials gain credibility.

The Social Capital theory provides an understanding of “the way action is shaped, constrained, and redirected by social context”. (Coleman, 1988) “It comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action.” (Coleman, 1988: pp. 95-96, p.100) In this context, networks and social embeddedness provide connectedness and greater access to enhanced social organisation and opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986: p. 21). Key in this regard is the element of trust, for, as Coleman (1988: p. 101 & 117) notes, where there is trust in the social organisation, the group can accomplish much more. However, Bourdieu (1986: p. 22) emphasises that a network of connections is not an automatic given and re-

quires work, time, and effort to understand and comply with the “limits of the group”.

CE has the potential to expand a student’s networks and simultaneously position him/her within relational systems that facilitate access to opportunities (Oubiña López & Gómez Baya, 2025: pp. 666-667). Simultaneously, students are exposed to the importance of critical attributes like trust and trustworthiness. “The function identified by the concept of ‘social capital’ is the value of these aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests.” (Coleman, 1998: p. 101)

Third, the motivation-based theory of volunteerism includes a specific desire to fulfil prosocial, empathetic, humanitarian concerns; to respond to socially developed norms and social acceptance by important others; to acquire learning through new experiences for career benefits. Individual identity and expectations were highlighted as the strongest drivers for people who commit to such activity (Finkelstein et al., 2005). Using motivation as the lens of analysis, personal values, social norms, and learning experiences drive volunteerism (Hu et al., 2016: pp. 100-101). While volunteerism is not the same as community engagement, they are closely related with similar inherent motivations.

Fourth, there is no gainsaying that recruitment decisions are made under conditions of uncertainty. Employers cannot directly observe productivity at the point of hire and rely on observable signals, qualifications, prestige of the graduating institution, work experience, to infer unobservable attributes (Spence, 1973: p. 356). Hiring is thus an investment decision, and Signalling Theory (acknowledging employer subjectivity) provides an explanatory framework of the immutable and alterable indices and “signals” that constitute and influence the assessment of employability (Spence, 1973: p. 357 & p. 360). The emphasised signals may drive certain groups out of the market, and when this happens, there is no countervailing experience to prompt the employer to change his beliefs. Thus, for example, CE may signal prosocial orientation, initiative, teamwork, ethical commitment, and civic-mindedness; however, it does not predict actual job performance. If the employer is looking for tangible skills such as education and graduate school reputation, then CE will have no impact on the recruitment and selection process, notwithstanding its positive attributes. CE will continue to be excluded from the assessment. The fact, however, extrapolating from Spence’s theory, is that the educational institution conveys no useful information for recruitment purposes: “The implication ... is that there can be stable prerequisites for jobs that convey no information by virtue of their existence and hence serve no function.” (Spence, 1973: p. 367) In this reality, valuable information may be (arbitrarily, one might argue) excluded because it is not identified as a selection index by the employer or the market.

The literature contains few longitudinal studies examining whether volunteering and community engagement are associated with more positive employment outcomes than non-volunteering. Those who have studied employability and per-

formance yield no consensus on whether volunteering (or community engagement) enhances or detracts from job performance (Hu et al., 2016; Rodell, 2013; Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021). However, reflecting on some of the more positive research, Rodell (2013) suggests that volunteerism may contribute to job performance, while Giancaspro and Manuti (2021: p. 2) state categorically that “[r]ecent studies confirmed that volunteering enhances both ‘hard’ skills and ‘soft’ skills.” Advancing their position, they emphasise the importance of both skill sets, especially in the 21st-century workplace. “Those who possess these ‘soft skills’ are frequently preferred over those who merely possess technical skills.” (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021: p. 2)

2.2. Case Studies on the Effect of Volunteering on Employability

Baert & Vujić (2018) studied the employability impact of listing volunteering on a CV. The experiment aimed to determine whether listing volunteering on a CV causally increases an applicant’s chances of receiving a positive employer response, especially an interview invitation. They sent randomised pairs of fictitious applications (288 vacancy pairs) to real employers for advertised vacancies, and within each pair, the applications were designed to be equivalent except that one randomly revealed volunteering while the other did not. The design allowed them to attribute differences in employer responses to the *signal* of volunteering on the CV.

Baert and Vujic found that volunteering increased employability: overall, volunteers received a positive response (an invitation to a job interview) in 22.9% of applications, compared with non-volunteering applications, which received a call back in 15.6% of cases leading to a finding that “[v]olunteering candidates... have 7.3 percentage points higher probability of receiving any positive reaction and 2.8 percentage points higher probability of being immediately invited for a job interview (Baert & Vujić, 2018: p. 826 & 832-833). Volunteering thus appeared to function as a labour-market advantage at the early hiring stage (screening), at least in their Belgian context.

Further, the research found that the employability premium was higher for female applicants than for male applicants, for women, the mention of volunteering increased the positive potential by 13.2% and the probability of a job interview invitation by 6.9%. This was especially prevalent when, for example, volunteer work was presented as a life-saving food provider or a cancer foundation, rather than engaging with a sporting club (Baert & Vujić, 2018: p. 828; Sauer, 2015). The number of volunteering activities had no impact on the positive result.

Their conclusion was that employers may be reading their own prosocial preferences into evidence of volunteering or interpreting volunteering as evidence of desirable but often unobserved traits (Baert & Vujić, 2018: p. 834). Volunteering thus appeared to improve employability potential because it serves as a credible signal during selection, in addition to the rest of the CV.

A similar study to that conducted by Baert and Vujić (2018) was replicated in

the USA (Alfonso-Costillo et al., 2021). They sent out 2000 fictitious CVs to prospective employers for advertised jobs. The results confirmed a significantly higher number of callbacks for job applicants whose resumes included volunteering (63% were called back) than for the control group, which had no indication of volunteer activity (45% were called back) (Alfonso-Costillo et al., 2021: p. 3). They further reported a strong positive, especially in job markets related to retail (13.7%), real estate (11.7%), and animal services, whereas the opposite occurred in the technology and automobile industries.

Higher education community engagement maps reasonably well onto what Baert and Vujić show employers reward at the first hiring threshold: visible, credible pro-social engagement that signals work-relevant qualities.

The studies demonstrate that CE may serve as a labour-market signal rather than merely a moral good. If employers use volunteering as a screening cue, graduates' CE activities can serve as a differentiator in crowded entry-level markets, especially when academic records are similar. However, graduates need to list CE in a way that makes their learning and skills acquired legible to employers, not as a vague "volunteered sometimes". Credentials for the skills would be an added benefit. Baert and Vujic make the specific point that their experiment worked because volunteering was visible on the CV.

Volunteering/CE was evidently more valuable in roles requiring interpersonal competence and less influential in highly technical or experience-dominated fields. This was endorsed by Marais and Janse van Rensburg (2024: p. 89), who examined employers' expectations of entry-level HR graduates. They concluded that "[e]mployers anticipate that graduates will participate in... volunteer work, [and] community engagement." However, volunteer experience does not consistently compensate for employment gaps or the lack of formal work history. These findings suggest that CE would be treated as a supplementary rather than primary signal.

Together, these studies confirm that some employers treat CE as a positive hiring signal, but not consistently. It depends on the sector, occupation, and the extent to which the CE activity is related to the job for which the application is made. In all cases, volunteer experience did not compensate for a gap in experience in a statistically significant way, but it was a positive influencer when everything else was equal (Baert & Vujić, 2018; Alfonso-Costillo et al., 2021; Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024).

3. The Current Study: Research Methodology

This study aims to examine how CE is perceived and valued in the context of graduate employability in South Africa. Specifically, the research explores how engagement in CE influences employers' recruitment decisions. Secondly, the study explores the alignment between employer expectations and academic staff perspectives, examining convergences and divergences between how employers and academic staff view CE as an enabler of workplace readiness. The study adopted a

mixed-methods approach, combining secondary and primary research to ensure both breadth and depth of insight. The research design was guided by the principles of validity, representativeness, and ethical compliance.

3.1. Research Design

The research was structured in two primary phases. The first phase involved exploratory and contextual work, including secondary data review, big data analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI) scanning of recruitment and employability trends.

The Exploratory Data Intelligence (EDI) phase served as the foundational “discovery-driven” layer of the study. The big data component involved mining large-scale labour market datasets from professional platforms such as LinkedIn, Talent Insights, PNet, GradConnection, and Glassdoor. This was supplemented by a digital corpus of graduate job advertisements and corporate ESG/Sustainability reports. The research employed Natural Language Processing (NLP) and AI-enabled text-mining. The logic focused on keyword co-occurrence, measuring how frequently specific CE terms appeared alongside technical skill requirements within professional disciplines (e.g. “community engagement” with “law”).

This phase informed the design of the survey instruments by identifying relevant constructs (“skill clusters”) and emerging workforce expectations related to CE. These clusters were translated into thematic sections of the primary survey instruments, ensuring that the questions posed to academics and employers were grounded in current recruitment terminology identified during the EDI phase. The big data phase was not an analysis of the survey respondents themselves, but a macro-level scan of the South African job market used to design the survey. The second phase comprised primary data collection through two self-administered web-based surveys hosted on the Lime Survey platform. Each survey was designed to capture the unique perspectives of the two participant groups while maintaining consistency in thematic coverage for comparative analysis.

3.2. Target Population

The research targeted two key populations:

- 1) The academic staff at STADIO Higher Education, a registered private higher education institution in South Africa. The respondents represented the internal academic community responsible for teaching, curriculum design, and student development.
- 2) Industry professionals, including human resource managers, recruitment specialists, talent acquisition leads, and senior executives involved in graduate hiring decisions.

The academic staff population was treated as a census, with all eligible staff invited to participate. For the industry survey, a purposive sampling approach was used to ensure participation from leading firms and organisations that actively employ graduates in business administration, commerce, information technology,

law, architecture, and engineering.

3.3. Survey Instruments, Administration, and Ethical Considerations

The academic staff survey was designed to collect quantitative data on teaching, the integration of CE into the curriculum, and the perceived employability relevance of CE. The industry professionals survey sought to elicit employer perspectives on recruitment practices, valued graduate attributes, and the importance of CE in hiring decisions.

Each instrument was structured into clear thematic sections to ensure coherence, comparability, and analytical depth. The surveys were distributed electronically via unique Lime Survey links, accompanied by formal invitation letters that outlined the study purpose, the participation process, and ethical assurances. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and aligned with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) and the ethical standards of the South African Market Research Association (SAMRA).

For the academic survey, invitations were distributed to STADIO staff via institutional communication channels. For the industry survey, invitations were sent directly to potential participants identified by STADIO. Each invitation included a QR Code and an estimated completion time of 15 minutes.

3.4. Fieldwork and Response Monitoring

For the industry survey, 40 invitations were issued, and 11 fully completed responses were received, representing a reasonably high-level sample of decision-makers across sectors. Among the 11 participating organisations, eight were small enterprises employing between 1 and 50 people (72.7%), one was a medium-sized organisation employing from 51 to 250 people (9.1%), and two were large organisations employing more than 250 people (18.2%).

For the academic staff survey, 97 valid completions were received from a possible total of 190 respondents.

3.5. Data Management and Analysis

On closure of the surveys, both datasets underwent data cleaning, verification and quality assurance procedures. All responses were anonymised prior to analysis. Quantitative data were processed using statistical software to produce descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and comparative cross-tabulations. Qualitative open-ended responses from the 97 academic and 11 industry professionals were subjected to thematic content analysis to extract interpretive insights and contextual meaning. The study used “thematic content analysis”. Qualitative data was subjected to both AI-assisted text analytics (for frequency) and manual coding of employer case studies to extract nuanced contextual meaning. Themes were validated using a triangulation protocol, in which a finding was considered significant only if verified across at least two independent data streams.

The final integrated analysis compared perspectives between academic staff and industry professionals, identifying alignment points, divergence and actionable implications for curriculum development and strategic planning. Data was stored securely and used solely for academic and institutional purposes.

Overall, the methodology was a mixed-methods design where AI/Big Data provided the market reality (Phase 1), which then dictated the design of the primary surveys (Phase 2), with the results finally validated through qualitative triangulation (Phase 3).

4. Findings and Analysis

The study responds to the growing need for higher education institutions to align their academic offerings with evolving labour market expectations in an increasingly socially conscious economy (Tomlinson, 2017; Holmes, 2013). In South Africa's post-pandemic landscape, popular discussion highlights employers seeking graduates who demonstrate not only disciplinary expertise but also transferable skills in community engagement and cross-cultural competence. STADIO Higher Education, a private multi-faculty institution in South Africa, conducted this study to empirically investigate the effects of these dimensions, particularly CE, on recruitment, selection, and employability. By assessing how employers perceive CE when evaluating graduate candidates and comparing those perceptions with academic staff perspectives, the study generates evidence to inform curriculum renewal, policy formulation, and strategic partnerships between STADIO and the wider labour market.

CE forms a critical component of STADIO's mission to produce graduates who are socially responsive, ethically grounded, and capable of contributing to sustainable community development. CE represents the interface through which the institution translates knowledge into societal impact by collaborating with external stakeholders, addressing community needs, and fostering civic-minded learning experiences.

Findings from the Academic Staff Survey

The table summarises the respondents' teaching experience.

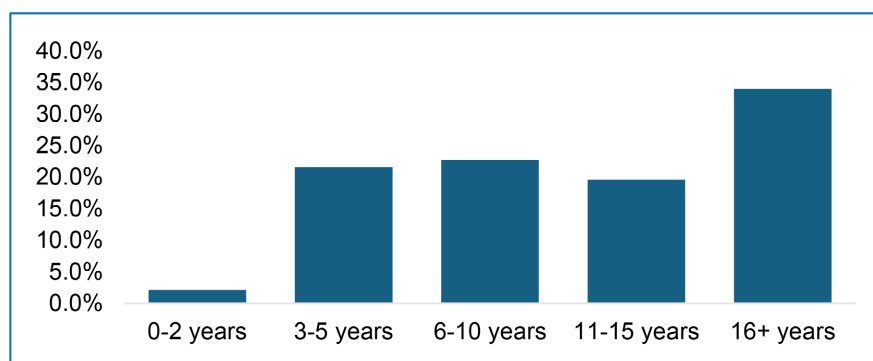


Figure 1. Years of teaching experience (N = 97).

The highest qualifications of the respondents (n = 97) are summarised below.

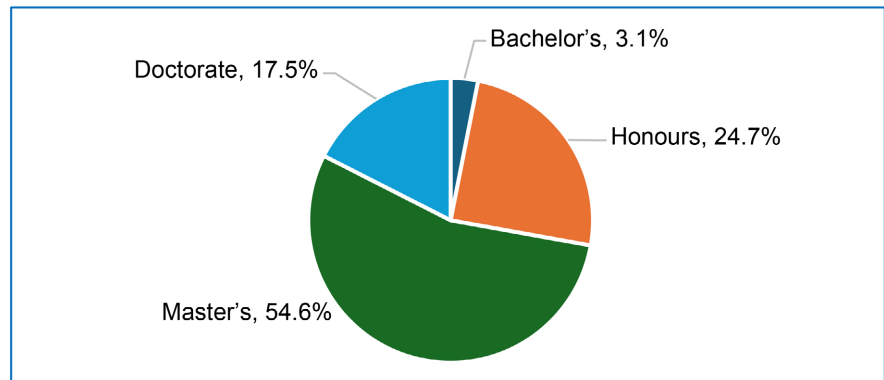


Figure 2. Highest academic qualifications of respondents (n = 97).

From the evidence above (**Figure 1**), it is apparent that the respondents were predominantly experienced educators. **Figure 2** demonstrates scholarly depth and evidence-based teaching practice. 75.3% of STADIO academics reported also having professional experience relevant to their disciplines, reflecting a strong alignment between academic teaching and real-world industry contexts. These results provide a strong foundation, affirming that STADIO's academic workforce possesses the qualifications, experience, and intellectual capacity to engage with the strategic academic discourse and curriculum transformation discussions that underpin the question of CE as a driver of responsive curricula that support employability.

Figure 3 presents academic staff perceptions regarding whether CE should be an integral part of student education at STADIO.

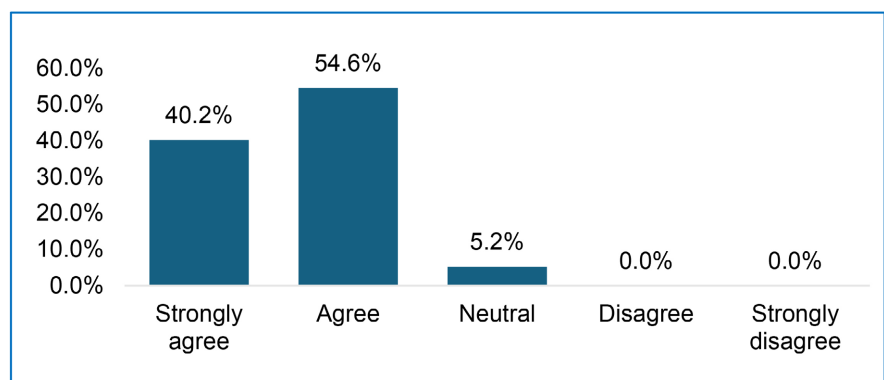


Figure 3. Perceptions of community engagement as a core educational component (n = 97).

There is overwhelming support among academic staff for community engagement as a fundamental component of higher education. A combined 94.8% of respondents either agreed (54.6%) or strongly agreed (40.2%) that CE should be an integral part of student education. This level of consensus indicates that CE is deeply rooted in the academic philosophy and values of STADIO's faculty. Academic staff clearly recognise their role in shaping socially responsible graduates

who can apply academic knowledge to real-world contexts.

The findings further confirm the institutional ethos that prioritises the mandate that civic learning and social transformation are essential outcomes of higher education. The absence of any disagreement further underscores a shared vision amongst faculty members regarding the necessity of bridging the gap between classroom theory and community realities. This alignment creates fertile ground for strengthening CE frameworks and policies within STADIO, ensuring that engagement activities are systematically integrated across Schools and programmes.

Figure 4 presents the extent to which the academic staff regard CE as essential for preparing students for the workplace and broader societal contribution.

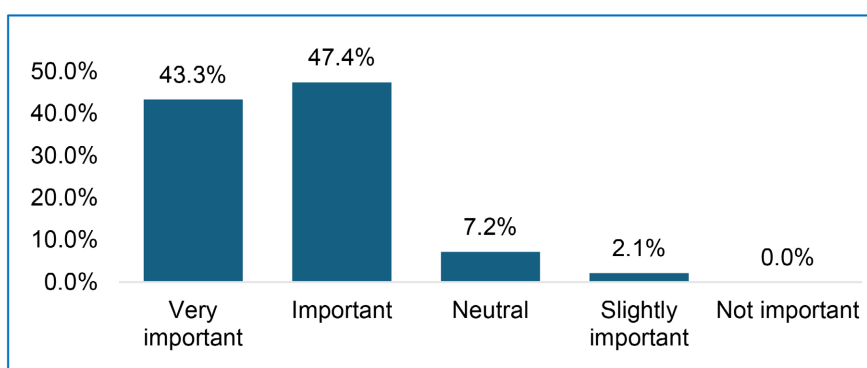


Figure 4. Perceived importance of community engagement for preparing students for the workplace (n = 97).

There is overwhelming consensus among respondents regarding the significance of CE for student success. A combined 90.7% of academics considered CE to be either important (47.4%) or very important (43.3%), while only 9.3% expressed neutral or marginal views. No respondents rated CE as unimportant. Respondents clearly associate CE with the development of transferable skills such as teamwork, empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills, which are highly valued in both professional and community contexts. STADIO's academic community perceive CE not merely as an optional co-curricular activity, but as a strategic pedagogical tool for fostering holistic graduate development.

The staff acknowledged several barriers impeding optimal integration, including internal and external structural, logistical, and contextual constraints; however, overall, this did not detract from the significant view that STADIO should advance its trajectory of integrating CE into curricula if graduate employability and relevance for the world of work are its committed value proposition.

In the industry survey, the majority of perspectives captured in this study originate from small enterprises, which are typically characterised by flatter structures, multi-skilled roles, and close interaction with clients and communities. The presence of two large organisations ensured that corporate perspectives were not included. Further, among the 11 participating organisations, seven operated primarily within South Africa and four maintained multinational operations across mul-

tiple countries. Nine participants held roles with direct decision-making authority over recruitment and organisational strategy (81.8%). The composition of the industry sample indicates that the survey captured diverse perspectives, and although the sample was small, a clear pattern emerged. Their responses provide a credible signal of employer expectations regarding recruitment, selection, and graduate readiness, as well as the relevance of CE in professional settings.

That said, the findings presented should be interpreted as perception-based and exploratory. As noted above, the data were derived from a relatively small group of employers purposively selected from specific industry sectors; therefore, the results reflect the views and experiences of this sample rather than a statistically representative employer population. As such, the results are intended to provide indicative insights into employer perceptions rather than generalizable conclusions about the broader labour market.

Through both quantitative and qualitative responses, the data revealed that employers generally recognise the developmental value of CE, yet only a minority formally integrate it into recruitment criteria. CE was endorsed in principle by 8 respondents (72.7%), with 4 rating it as very important and 4 as moderately important. Three respondents attached limited or no weight to CE in their recruitment decisions, with 2 indicating it was not very important and 1 indicating it was not important at all. Similarly, three respondents strongly agreed, and five agreed that CE develops essential workplace skills, while 2 were neutral and one disagreed. Notwithstanding this conceptual support, only 4 employers reported that CE experience is explicitly factored into hiring processes, revealing a gap between recognition and routine acknowledgement. Employers described CE as valuable for developing communication, teamwork, and ethical awareness, yet selection remained anchored in demonstrable technical competence and role-specific capability. Employers emphasise problem-solving, adaptability, and digital competence as the most critical employability drivers, while identifying limited real-world experience, professionalism, and resilience as ongoing challenges among graduates (Bhardwa, 2021, np).

When ranking the three most important attributes they look for in graduate hires, five employers ranked problem-solving ability first (45.5%), two ranked it second (18.2%), and one ranked it third (9.1%), meaning eight respondents in total (72.8%) positioned problem-solving within their top three competencies. Teamwork and collaboration ranked among the top three for seven respondents (63.6%), most often as the third most important competency, while digital and technical skills ranked among the top three for six respondents (54.6%) (see Singh & Ehlers, 2026: to be published). Communication, skills, ethical awareness, and leadership potential appeared less frequently in the top three, suggesting they are viewed as baseline expectations rather than differentiating qualities. This pattern reinforces that employers prioritise graduates who can diagnose problems, design and execute solutions, and contribute productively in collaborative, project-driven environments (which begs the question: why is CE not identified as a marker of

such skill when recruitment and candidate selection are considered?).

Employers acknowledge that they would reward CE if it could be demonstrably linked to teamwork skills, initiative, and applied problem-solving that is directly transferable to workplace contexts. For higher education institutions, the implication is that employability is strengthened when students are placed in authentic work-like contexts and required to generate evidence of deliverables and performance outcomes that are appropriately credentialled.

Overall, the findings illustrate a pragmatic perspective: CE enriches graduate development, but it does not override the centrality of technical proficiency, reliability, and professional conduct. Employers emphasise that CE has the greatest value when it is integrated into discipline-specific learning, produces measurable outputs, and there is clear evidence that these activities have equipped graduates with workplace-ready skills rather than existing as a peripheral or voluntary add-on.

Interestingly, in the employer survey, when asked about their preferences for CE versus internationalisation, four respondents prioritised CE, two favoured internationalisation, and five selected neither. Employers who chose neither explained that technical competence, discipline-specific expertise, and workplace readiness remain the primary bases for graduate hiring decisions. The preference for CE over internationalisation reflects employers' appreciation for locally grounded, community-facing experience. CE was described as more relevant to South Africa's labour market, where graduates must work with diverse client groups, navigate real-world constraints, and demonstrate social responsiveness. International exposure, though recognised as valuable in certain globally networked industries, was not seen as a universal requirement for employability.

South African higher education institutions are mandated to advance community engagement as the third pillar of scholarship alongside teaching and research. Universities, thus, promote CE and civic responsibility as graduate attributes. If employers do not recognise such engagement in recruitment, the employability return on this mandate diminishes, weakening students' incentives to meaningfully participate in CE projects.

To enhance awareness of CE and showcase the value of civic-mindedness and responsibility, curricula must highlight organisations such as Patagonia and M-PESA that built their businesses and brands on these principles (Singh, 2026: to be published). Exposure to positive modelling helps students internalise the value and purpose of social responsibility. However, universities and the workplace also need to find a common purpose in acknowledging the benefits of CE, informing selection, and leveraging it as a meaningful signal when recruiting new graduates. Employer surveys in South Africa consistently emphasise work readiness, communication skills, ethical leadership, teamwork, and adaptability, competencies that overlap significantly with those cultivated through structured CE.

In addition, consideration must be given to the following actualities:

- 1) Many new entry-level candidates to the world of work lack formal work experience, and employers must acknowledge the challenges confronting new grad-

uates (Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024: p. 88). Recognising that employers must make hiring decisions, Schmidt and Hunter (1998: p. 264 & p. 272) summarised the different recruitment and selection methods commonly implemented based on 85 years of empirical data. Among the options commonly used in entry-level recruitment, they note that interests and education level, while widely used, have very low predictive validity.

2) Service-oriented sectors (education, health, NGOs, public administration, and retail) all place value on stakeholder engagement (Buonomo et al., 2020; Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024).

3) Companies globally increasingly position themselves around ESG (environment, social, governance) and CSR (Hu et al., 2016: p. 100).

CE can thus function as a positive hiring signal, and the omission of CE recognition may be prejudicial towards new recruits, as it can reduce the visibility of the skills early-career applicants bring. In South Africa, where many students combine study with community engagement and other community-based responsibilities, excluding such experience may over-emphasise quantitative factors and misrepresent actual capability. Where organisations publicly commit to social responsibility, recruitment practices should reflect congruence between values and selection criteria.

CE only becomes legible to employers when it is translated into evidence: problem solved, people engaged, tools used, output delivered, and judgement shown.

Figure 5 shows the link between key recruitment and CE deliverables:

KEY RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION DRIVERS		COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OUTPUTS
Problem-Solving Ability	↔	Problem analysis and solution implementation
Teamwork and Collaboration	↔	Team-based project delivery with external stakeholders
Digital capability	↔	Digitally mediated artefacts such as plans, dashboards, presentations and reports
Workplace Readiness	↔	Initiative under real-world constraints
Communication Skills	↔	Stakeholder communication across diverse audiences ("building the team")
Prosocial and Ethical Awareness	↔	Ethical judgement in practice e.g. consent, inclusion, confidentiality.

Figure 5. Community engagement outputs responding to industry hiring signals.

To ensure optimal advantage, structured CE activities must produce tangible artefacts linked to the key drivers of recruitment and selection, such as reports indicating problem analyses, solution implementation plans, stakeholder engagement documentation, and digitally mediated project outputs. These artefacts enable graduates to demonstrate applied skills and capabilities in authentic contexts. When accompanied by formal assessment and credentialing, such as digital badges, micro-credentials, or verified portfolios, CE outcomes become legible within recruitment processes. In this way, CE functions as a supplementary yet purposeful labour-market signal that enables employers to infer transferable skills and workplace readiness among early-career graduates.

5. Conclusion

While CE can serve as a valuable signal of transferable skills, pro-social motivation, and stakeholder competence across all age groups (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021: p. 3), it appears to be inconsistently recognised in hiring decisions. The advantages, and hidden competencies, that CE can demonstrate include various overlapping mechanisms. First, human capital development may include transferable skills such as project management, communication, and, notably, service orientation. Second, community involvement can expand networks and convey embeddedness and relational capabilities (Oubiña López & Gómez Baya, 2025: p. 667), providing an important indicator that the candidate may be “locally rooted” and active within a local economy, community, or social structure. Further, CE highlights an alignment with mission-driven or stakeholder-oriented organisations. Fourth, applying the lens of signalling theory, CE participation indicates pro-social motivation, reliability, or alignment with values. This should be of value, especially when there is uncertainty about an applicant’s soft skills. “The focus on this special context [is] justified by the assumption that the asset of knowledge and soft skills acquired through this opportunity could be considered as an intangible and strategic capital for both individuals as well as for organisations” (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021: p. 9). Similarly, providing an overview of the Graduate Capital Model which includes the harder concepts on knowledge, technical skills, and qualifications and the Human Capital Model that includes metacognitive skills such as decision-making and problem-solving, and emotional, social and cultural intelligence that govern human interaction, Bisschoff and Massyn (2023: p. 61) urge for both to be acknowledged in the new workplace. (See also Abbasi et al., 2018; Hosain et al., 2023) CE orientation, like CSR orientation as pointed out by Bisschoff and Massyn (2023: p. 70), predicts personal commitment to civic and social responsibility with the concomitant attributes.

These considerations demonstrate the credibility of CE as a rational input into the selection and recruitment process, leaving the onus on employers to then apply them in a job-relevant, structured manner. When employers do not consider CE in the selection process, it may narrow their assessment of candidate capability, including reducing their ability to assess non-technical competencies (e.g.,

leadership, teamwork). Secondly, many interview panels will miss critical signals of prosocial motivation and organisational citizenship potential. The deeper, mutually beneficial learning and development engagement between students and marginalised communities during the CE projects has the potential to significantly change how students respond to people with whom they may otherwise never have made contact.

The analysis of the academic staff survey presented in this study provides strong conceptual support for institutionalising CE. Almost all academic staff (94.8%) believe CE should be an integral part of higher education, as it is important for equipping graduates for the world of work. However, while comparable South African field experiments are limited, the findings from the industry respondents confirmed that CE is not an integrated or automatically valued as a factor in recruitment and selection. Employers recognise CE conceptually but continue to hire primarily based on technical mastery. CE primarily affects hiring when it produces assessable, credentialled outputs, such as certifications, professional artefacts, and demonstrable workplace-ready deliverables. “[Given the] unstructured learning occasions, a conscious elaboration of this experience and the capitalisation and transformation of learning into concrete and spendable professional skills are fundamental to further develop volunteers’ career identity.” (Giancaspro & Manuti, 2021: p. 9)

As higher education institutions continue to emphasise the integration of CE into the curriculum, industry feedback must be taken into account. If employers do not view CE as a driver of employability, it will negatively affect students’ choices and participation in CE activities. Most students enter higher education primarily to improve their job-market prospects (see Singh & Ehlers, 2026, to be published; Marais & Janse van Rensburg, 2024). The disconnect between the university’s mission and students’ perceived value of their learning journey, and employers’ attitudes to CE should be addressed, higher education institutions may need to re-frame CE projects, as the tension appears to lie not in CE itself, but for instance in the more visible credentialling of tangible outcomes.

Establishing a CE Employability Framework for the institution, approved by the Senate, that sets minimum requirements for CE in the formal curriculum may address industry-identified challenges and enhance the employability dividend of CE. Such a framework could, at least:

- 1) Require all programmes to include at least one structured CE activity.
- 2) Ensure a common institutional language and understanding amongst staff and students of why CE is relevant, balancing civic responsibility with graduate attributes identified for the workplace.
- 3) Design CE projects that link to industry expectations and respond to the drivers that employers look for during recruitment and selection.
- 4) Ensure that identified CE projects are assessable and that skills and attributes are credentialled.
- 5) Continually evaluate and monitor CE projects, ensuring academic, commu-

nity, and workplace alignment.

When implemented together and in an organised manner, these elements ensure that CE becomes systemic rather than fragmented and siloed. It balances social responsibility and workplace readiness through structured, credible activities (assessments and credentials). Critically, students graduate not only with knowledge and experience of CE but also with competencies that are evidenced and aligned with employers' expectations during recruitment and selection (enhancing employability). Last, but most significant, communities benefit from sustained, purposeful partnerships rather than episodic interventions.

For STADIO, the Framework will align the institution's civic mission with its academic mandate and its employability value proposition, a triad that defines a progressive, transformative, responsive higher education institution (**Table 1**).

Table 1. A community engagement-employability framework for higher education.

#	Action	Value	Purpose	Strategic Impact
1	Require every programme to include at least one structured CE activity	Institutionalising Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevents CE from being ad hoc, voluntary, or uneven across Schools Ensures equity of opportunity so that all students can benefit, not only those in certain programmes. Embed CE into the curriculum rather than positioning it as an extracurricular add-on. Strengthens the institution's civic mandate and public accountability. 	This creates a culture of engagement across the institution, ensuring that civic responsibility becomes a normative expectation rather than an optional enrichment activity.
2	Establish a common institutional jargon and shared understanding of CE and its purpose	Coherence and Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eliminates fragmented interpretations and misunderstandings of CE (e.g. charity work, volunteering, service learning). Aligns staff and students around why CE matters, balancing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> civic responsibility and social justice development of workplace-ready graduates. Ensures that CE is not seen as competing with academic excellence but enhancing it. 	A shared language creates institutional clarity, prevents dilution of purpose, and strengthens quality assurance processes. It allows CE to be articulated clearly to students, regulators, industry partners, and communities.
3	Link CE projects to industry expectations and employment drivers	Enhancing Graduate Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligns CE with the competencies employers actively seek, such as problem-solving, teamwork, ethical reasoning, communication, adaptability, and social intelligence. Provides students with real-world contexts to demonstrate capability. Translates civic engagement into measurable workplace relevance. 	CE becomes a bridge between the institution and industry, improving graduate outcome. It positions engagement as both socially responsive and economically relevant.

Continued

4	Ensure CE is assessed and credentialled	Legitimacy, Accountability, and Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signals that CE is academically rigorous and not symbolic. • Encourages meaningful participation rather than passive involvement. • Allows the development of digital badges, microcredentials, presentations, and portfolio evidence. • Makes transferable skills visible during recruitment. 	Assessment formalises learning. Credentialling ensures students can articulate and evidence what they have gained from the CE activities. This strengthens both academic standards and employability pathways.
5	Continuous evaluation and monitoring for purpose alignment	Sustainability and Quality Assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that projects remain academically sound, ethically responsible, community-responsive, and workplace relevant. • Prevents tokenism or exploitative engagement. • Allows adaptation to changing industry and societal needs. 	Ongoing evaluation embeds CE within institutional governance and quality systems, ensuring it evolves rather than stagnates.

6. Research Limitations

Given the limited sample size and purposive sampling strategy amongst the employer group, the findings may be influenced by sampling effects, including sectoral concentration, organisational size, geographic location, and the professional roles of the participating employers. These factors may shape the perspectives captured in the study and potentially introduce selection bias, whereby employers with stronger views or existing engagement with higher education initiatives may have been more likely to participate. Consequently, the results should be read as exploratory signals that highlight emerging patterns and areas for further investigation, rather than definitive evidence of employer-wide trends.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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