



Transition to Work

From Study to Employment: Expectations,
Reality and Workplace Readiness

INSIGHT REPORT | August 2026

Meet the board



Aashish Neupane

Western Sydney University
Nepal | NSW

- NSW International Student Ambassador
- Chancellor's Unsung Hero Award Winner 2025
- NSW International Student of the Year 2024



Angela Sojan

University of Melbourne
India | VIC

- Victorian International Student of the Year 2025



Dayoung Yun (Diane)

Griffith University
South Korea | QLD

- Austrade International Student Ambassador
- Gold Coast Mayor's Student Ambassador
- Content creator with 50,000 followers



Diego Luna Alamilla

IKON Institute of Australia
Mexico | NSW

- NSW International Student of the Year 2025
- IKON Institute of Australia Student Ambassador



Gilbertofer Tanoto

Charles Darwin University
Indonesia | NT

- StudyNT Student Ambassador
- CDU Student Ambassador
- CDU Student Council Vice President



Mohamed Ishraf Mohamed Ismath

Swinburne University of Technology
Sri Lanka | VIC

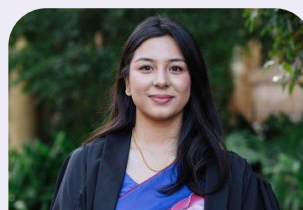
- Young Energy Professionals Committee Member
- Swinburne University of Technology Student Ambassador



Ngou Cheng (Ocean) Vong

University of Melbourne
China-Macao | VIC

- University of Melbourne International Student Ambassador
- University of Melbourne Peer Mentor



Ojaswi Shrestha

University of Western Australia
Nepal | WA

- International Students Department President for UWA Student Guild (2026)
- The Duke of Edinburgh's International Silver Award Alumni



Vaness Yap

University of Tasmania
Malaysia | TAS

- Study Tasmania Student of the Year 2025

About This Report

Student voice on the transition to work

Pearson's International Student Advisory Board (ISAB) brings international students and graduates into conversations shaping their experience and future.

REPORT THEME

Success is defined by the ability to participate, contribute and build a future beyond graduation.



Report scope

This report synthesises the full meeting transcript, participant discussion notes and supporting materials. It covers job-search expectations, recruitment and hiring experiences, workplace rights, communication and workplace English, and the changing skills landscape. It is designed to support practical action by education providers, employers, policymakers and Pearson.

At a glance

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KEY INSIGHTS	SECTOR AUDIENCES	SHARED PRIORITY

Student Pathways

Four journeys into work

Behind every finding is a person trying to turn study into opportunity. These four ISAB members describe different ways to gain experience, stand out, build connections and keep moving forward, even when the next step is uncertain.

Diane Yun | Registered Nurse, Griffith University



Creating experience wherever she could

For Diane, nursing offered a comparatively clear pathway into professional practice through placements, but she did not rely on placements alone.

She looked for opportunities in different parts of her life: volunteering in hospitals, providing language support, playing piano as a volunteer and creating content. Each experience gave her another way to contribute, connect with people and build confidence.

Diane's journey shows that employability is not always built through one perfect opportunity. Sometimes, it grows through many smaller experiences that gradually become a professional story.

Gilbertofer Tanoto | Charles Darwin University



Discovering the power of local networks

For Gilbert, location changed the nature of the job search.

He contrasted Darwin's close professional networks with the much larger applicant pools found in major cities. In a smaller market, employers, educators and community members are more closely connected. Knowing local employers, and having someone willing to speak to your character and capability, can make opportunities easier to see and access.

Gilbert's experience highlights something students may not initially expect: finding work is not only about what you know. Sometimes, it is also about where you are, who knows your work and the trust you have built within a community.

Angela Sojan | Project Manager, University of Melbourne



Learning that the résumé is only the beginning

Angela entered competitive internship and graduate recruitment processes knowing that her résumé needed to open the door. She soon found that getting through that door was only the first step.

As the process continued, employers wanted to know more: Had she led others? Worked in a team? Presented ideas? Contributed beyond the classroom? Her volunteering, leadership and communication experiences became just as important as the qualifications listed on the page.

Angela's experience shows that standing out is not simply about having more credentials. It is about being able to show who you are, what you have done and the value you could bring.

Diego Luna | Strength-Based Counsellor, Ikon Institute of Australia



Staying close to opportunity

Diego described one idea that has shaped his approach to work: proximity.

For him, progress comes from staying close to people, opportunities and decision-makers: showing up, building relationships and being willing to act even when the outcome is uncertain. He connected career growth with planning, resilience and personal responsibility, but also with creating opportunities for others as he moves forward.

Diego's journey shows that careers are not built through certainty alone. They are also built through presence: being in the room, staying connected and taking the next step before the whole path is visible.

These four journeys point to a shared reality: a qualification may open the door, but experience, relationships, confidence and persistence often shape what happens next.

Executive Summary

A degree is only one part of being work-ready

The second meeting of Pearson's International Student Advisory Board explored the experiences of international students and recent graduates transitioning from study into employment in Australia. Building on the inaugural English for Success discussion, the session examined graduate employability, recruitment experiences, workplace communication, employer perceptions and workforce readiness.

The discussion revealed a consistent message: obtaining a degree is only one part of securing employment. Many challenges, including competition, opaque recruitment, limited experience and the need for professional confidence, are shared by domestic and international graduates. For international graduates, these challenges can be compounded by visa and work-rights assumptions, limited local networks, the discounting of overseas experience and unfamiliar workplace conventions.

At the same time, students emphasised that opportunities do exist. Those who succeed often do so through persistence, relationship-building, volunteering, work placements and a willingness to seek opportunities proactively. The discussion also highlighted communication skills beyond English proficiency, particularly confidence, cultural awareness, active listening and professional interaction.

The findings suggest that improving graduate outcomes requires a broader focus on workforce readiness, employer engagement and practical employability support from the beginning of the student journey.

CENTRAL MESSAGE

The transition to work does not begin at graduation. It starts when students begin building skills, experience, networks and confidence.

Students described an experience economy in which qualifications are necessary but often insufficient; an experience paradox in which local experience is required before the first opportunity is offered; and a confidence gap that can prevent students from speaking up, presenting their achievements or protecting their workplace rights.

Ten insights emerging from the discussion

- ⑤ Employability preparation is beginning earlier, sometimes before university.
- ⑤ Qualifications are necessary but do not always differentiate candidates.
- ⑤ Australian work experience is treated as a signal of workplace readiness and familiarity.
- ⑤ Low-paid, unpaid or poorly structured opportunities can impose an experience tax.
- ⑤ Networking operates as social capital and can help candidates access opportunities.
- ⑤ Recruitment systems can feel impersonal, opaque and exclusionary.
- ⑤ Workplace communication is highly contextual and culturally nuanced.
- ⑤ Communication barriers are often confidence barriers rather than language capability alone.
- ⑤ Workplace rights and safety are part of workforce readiness.
- ⑤ Students increasingly expect portfolio careers and ongoing reskilling rather than one linear pathway.



Key Findings

1. Graduate employability is shaped by much more than academic performance

Many students arrived in Australia believing that strong grades and academic achievement would naturally lead to employment. The reality proved more complex. This is a broader graduate transition challenge, but international students may encounter additional barriers when overseas experience, work rights and familiarity with Australian workplace culture are assessed.

Participants consistently described increasing importance being placed on networking, industry connections, practical experience and personal initiative. Several students reflected that employers often prioritise demonstrated capability and professional relationships over academic results alone.

Student perspectives

- High GPA does not guarantee employment.
- Networking often opens doors that qualifications alone cannot.
- Employers seek evidence of practical experience and workplace readiness.
- Students who are proactive and engage with industry opportunities gain advantages.

What surprised students most?

- The volume of competition for graduate roles.
- The importance of personal connections.
- How long recruitment processes can take.
- The extent to which international and domestic graduates may be viewed differently.
- The importance of demonstrating value beyond academic performance.

ISAB recommendations

Universities should **be focusing not only on** academic achievement, but develop opportunities for industry engagement, networking, practical experience and career planning from the outset of a student's degree.

2. The transition from study to work is often more difficult than students expect

Participants identified a substantial gap between university expectations and labour market realities. While this gap is familiar to graduates more broadly, international students may experience it more sharply where local networks, Australian experience and knowledge of recruitment systems are limited.

While universities commonly promote graduate employability outcomes, students suggested that career pathways are frequently less predictable and more competitive than anticipated. Several participants felt universities over-promise outcomes while under-emphasising the challenges graduates may face.

Key challenges identified

- Limited access to relevant work experience.
- Difficulty securing first professional opportunities.
- Lack of understanding of recruitment systems.
- Financial barriers preventing participation in unpaid internships.
- Uncertainty surrounding visa pathways.
- Insufficient exposure to employer expectations.



ISAB recommendation

Career readiness should be embedded throughout degrees rather than concentrated in final-year subjects. Students need earlier exposure to workplace realities, employer expectations and practical job-search skills.

3. Networking has become an employability skill

A strong theme across the discussion was the importance of networking. Participants consistently described networking as critical to finding employment, securing interviews and understanding industry expectations. Many believed that building professional relationships often made the difference between success and failure.

The closer students remain to people whose careers they admire, the more opportunities they create for themselves.

PARTICIPANT INSIGHT

Proximity.



Students advised future international students to

- Attend industry events.
- Join student clubs and societies.
- Seek volunteering opportunities.
- Build a LinkedIn profile early.
- Reach out to industry professionals.
- Pursue informational interviews and coffee chats.

ISAB recommendations

Networking should be taught as a practical employability capability rather than left to individual initiative.

4. Workplace communication requires more than English proficiency

Consistent with earlier ISAB discussions on English for Success, students identified an important distinction between classroom English and workplace English. Many emphasised that communication challenges are rarely about grammar or vocabulary alone.

Workplace communication was described as

- More contextual.
- More relationship-driven.
- More culturally nuanced.
- More dependent on confidence and interpersonal skills.

Challenges students encounter

- Australian slang.
- Informal workplace language.
- Tone and humour.
- Small talk.
- Unwritten workplace norms.

Communication capabilities employers value most

- Active listening.
- Confidence.
- Professional self-presentation.
- Asking questions.
- Cultural awareness.
- Clear communication under pressure.
- Body language and eye contact.

ISAB recommendations

Universities should provide more practical training in workplace communication, public speaking, collaboration, assertiveness, cultural competence and workplace relationship-building.

5. Some students are paying an experience tax

Participants described low-paid, unpaid and poorly structured opportunities accepted primarily to obtain local experience. Examples included very low-paid marketing work, unpaid internships, placements attached to paid courses and internships dominated by administrative tasks rather than professional learning.



Risks identified

- Financial pressure can make unpaid experience unrealistic.
- Placement quality can vary significantly.
- A placement may provide a line on a résumé without meaningful skill development.
- Students from providers with fewer employer partnerships may need to source placements themselves.
- Relevant experience may be less accessible to mature students and students outside established graduate pipelines.

PARTICIPANT INSIGHT

Students need an opportunity to obtain experience, but the opportunity itself can be financially difficult to accept.

ISAB recommendations

Providers and employers should prioritise paid, relevant and quality-assured experience, with clear learning outcomes, supervision and pathways into further professional opportunity.

Recommendation

What would make the biggest difference?

When asked what single change would improve graduate employment outcomes, participants focused on four connected priorities.

1

Stronger university–employer partnerships

- ✓ More internships.
- ✓ More industry placements.
- ✓ Greater employer engagement.
- ✓ Direct pathways into professional experience.

2

Earlier employability support

- ✓ Career readiness should begin from day one rather than in final year.

3

Better preparation for workforce realities

- ✓ Resilience.
- ✓ Adaptability.
- ✓ Confidence.
- ✓ Professional networking.
- ✓ Understanding workplace culture.

4

Reduced bias towards international graduates

- ✓ Greater awareness of graduate visa pathways.
- ✓ Clearer understanding of work rights.
- ✓ Recognition of the skills and capabilities of international graduates.

Student Perspectives

Voices from the Board

Diego	"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."
Diane	"If you don't take action, nothing will happen."
Aashish	"Hard work beats talent."
Gilbert	"Fake it till you make it, and don't compare yourself to others."
Ojaswi	"Be proactive and put yourself out there."
Angela	"Maximise your opportunities for luck."
Ocean	"Don't be afraid of rejection."

Conclusion

Preparing students to participate, contribute and build a future

The ISAB discussion highlighted that employability is increasingly influenced by factors beyond academic achievement. Many transition challenges are shared across the graduate population. International students' experiences show how those challenges can be compounded by visa and work-rights assumptions, limited local networks, the treatment of overseas experience and unfamiliar workplace conventions. Workforce readiness therefore depends not only on qualifications, but also on practical experience, communication, confidence, resilience and cultural understanding.

For universities, employers and policymakers, the challenge is not simply preparing students to graduate. It is ensuring students are equipped to navigate recruitment realities, secure professional opportunities and participate confidently in Australian workplaces, while addressing the particular barriers that can shape international graduates' access to those opportunities. The actions in this report offer starting points for further testing and development with students, providers and employers.

As with the inaugural English for Success report, the message from students is clear:

CLOSING MESSAGE

Success is defined by the ability to participate, contribute and build a future beyond graduation.



About these insights

This paper reflects qualitative insights and recommendations from members of Pearson's International Student Advisory Board and does not represent every international student's experience. It is intended to bring student perspectives into sector discussions, with each organisation determining what is relevant to its context and how it may respond. Pearson's role is to provide a platform for these voices and help bring them into relevant conversations.



About **Pearson ISAB**

The Pearson International Student Advisory Board (ISAB) brings together student leaders from across Australia to share insights on the international student experience and help shape conversations around education, employability and the future workforce.

Convened by Pearson, ISAB serves as a platform to amplify student voices and strengthen collaboration between students, education providers, industry and government.

**Learn more about
Pearson International
Student Advisory Board**

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