The research-practice gap in Australian graduate selection: a bridge too far?

Mr Simon Fishwick

School of Management, University of Tasmania, Australia

Email: Simon.Fishwick@utas.edu.au

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Abstract

The selection process is at the sharp end of human resources and determines those who will work together towards achieving organisational objectives. There is competition for and shortages of talented graduate employees. Additionally, there has been research on gaps between academic literature and the human resources practices adopted by organisations: the largest being in recruitment and selection. However, relevant Australian research is limited and has a quantitative focus. This paper provides results of preliminary qualitative research from twelve semi-structured interviews concerning current Australian selection practices for business, law and engineering graduates and the reasons for the choice of practices.

Key words: selection strategies- graduates, research-practice gap

This paper reports on preliminary qualitative research into practices currently used by Australian firms to select business, law and engineering graduates. The rationale for this study comes from:

- The competition for talented graduates to contribute to organisations' objectives;

- Literature indicating the largest research-practice gap in human resources is in selection; and,

- A limited range of Australian reported graduate selection studies, all of which are quantitative.

Selection is the most important of the human resource functions as it determines those people who are going to contribute to organisational outcomes (Boxall & Purcell, 2011; Rousseau, 2006). Valid selection practices are important to performance outcomes and personality is related to performance (Rynes, Giluk & Brown, 2007). There is competition to hire talented University graduates who present a unique demographic opportunity for organisations (AAGE, 2011; Carless, 2007; Carless, Rasiah & Irmer, 2009; Fraser, Holland & Hecker, 2010). Additionally, there are increased demands on organisational performance (Wright & Kehoe, 2008) which sharpens the focus on utilising effective selection techniques with optimal speed to produce high performing, flexible employees who are more likely to stay (O'Leary, Lindholm, Whitford & Freeman, 2002).

There is considerable research that indicates a significant research-practice gap in HR practices with HR practitioners showing a low level of knowledge of research findings on selection techniques (Carless et al,

2009; Guest, 2007; Latham, 2007; Rynes et al, 2007). Also, there are calls for HR practitioners to facilitate an increased use of evidence-based management in organisational decisions (Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rousseau, 2006). Whilst there has been considerable research on what selection techniques are used, there is limited research into the choice, and the implementation, of specific selection procedures (Konig, Klehe, Berchtold & Kleinmann, 2010; Latham, 2007).

Bartram (2004) argued that little is known about selection practices outside US & UK with limited published Australian research into selection practices. Carless (2007) and Johns, Teo and Harrington (2007) published results of employer surveys and there are annual practitioner focussed surveys of graduate employers conducted by the Australian Association of Graduate Employer (AAGE, 2011). Di Milia (2004) reported on survey responses on managerial selection practices while O'Meara and Petzall (2009) reported a mixed method study on recruitment and selection practices for vice-chancellors of Australian universities. Whilst these studies identified selection techniques used, the rationale for, and the methods of assessing how selection techniques contributed to positive selection outcomes, were not presented.

The research-practice gap

Evidence- based management involves translating principles derived from research evidence into organisational practices (Rousseau, 2006). Despite 100 years of academic literature (Huffcutt, 2011; Konig et al, 2011; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), and, in particular in the last 25 years, academic research appears to have had limited influence on employee selection processes. Two particular areas relevant to employee selection where practitioners had low knowledge of research findings were: the importance of intelligence in predicting job performance and usefulness of personality tests (Rynes et al, 2007).

There have been University courses in Australia that have included personnel/HR studies for at least 25 years, yet academic teaching and research appears to have had limited penetration into HR practices (De Cieri, Fenwick & Hutchings, 2005; Di Milia, 2004; Konig et al, 2010) for reasons such as:

- Ignorance of the research shown by Australian HR managers believing incorrectly that research demonstrates that conscientiousness and values fit are better predictors of job performance than intelligence (Carless, Rasiah & Irmer, 2009);

- A lack of access to the research as academics tend not to publish in journals/periodicals read by practitioners while practitioners avoid technical and impractical academic journals (De Cieri et al, 2005; Guest, 2007; Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002);

- A lack of mechanisms for contact between academics and practitioners even when organisations have agreed to participate in research (De Cieri et al, 2005; Guest, 2007);

- A preference for judgment based informal methods used by other organisations (Guest, 2007; Highhouse, 2008);

- A focus on those techniques that permit defence against non-compliance with equal opportunity legislation (Konig et al, 2010); however, no Australian evidence could be found of any legal challenges to graduate selection practices or decisions;

- That academic research is not contextually suitable due to organisationally specific cultural and political factors (Colbert, Rynes & Brown, 2005; Lievens & Paepe, 2004; Rousseau, 2006); and,

- Costs of selection processes are incurred early and demonstrating selection procedure contribution to increased retention and performance is difficult (Konig et al 2010);

Effectiveness of selection techniques

The primary purpose of a selection process is to predict future performance, particularly whether applicants who score highly perform better. This is an area where HR can demonstrate its contribution to achieving organisational objectives (Gratton & Truss, 2003; Stanton, Young, Bartram & Leggat, 2010). Effective selection techniques utilise criteria to assess candidates' suitability for a specific role (person-job or P-J fit) and their suitability as a prospective organisational member (person-organisation or P-O fit) (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Scroggins, Thomas & Morris, 2008). There is increased emphasis on P-O fit which focuses on broader value-based characteristics such as: adaptability, conscientiousness, team-

orientation and responsibility, rather than on capabilities required to undertake a specific job role (O'Leary et al, 2002). P-O fit has dimensions of actual fit which is measured indirectly by the organisation while perceived fit is the employee's assessment (van Vuuren, Veldkamp, de Jong & Seydel, 2007). Attitude, honesty and people skills are seen as difficult to change whilst skills and knowledge can be developed on the job (Bartram, 2004). Chew & Chan (2008) found that organisational commitment of incumbents and intention to stay was significantly positively affected by P-O fit. A person's set of values is an element of fit and research on selecting for values fit (compatibility between personal and organisational values) found that values fit indicated longer service (retention) and higher displays of OCB (Rynes et al, 2002).

For a technique to have predictive validity, it needs to distinguish between "good" and "poor" performers. How can the impact of a selection process used up to twelve months earlier be assessed? Factors impacting on performance include those based on capability, on motivation, on work-life factors, on leadership/supervision, on group based factors and on the extent to which the environment was challenged or supported the achievement of the position's objectives.

Reported studies either focus on types of selection techniques used (and not used) for hiring by practitioners (Di Milia, 2004) or the relative validity of these alternative selection techniques (Ispas, Iliescu, Ilie & Johnson, 2010). Konig et al's (2010) two measures of predictive validity were "…applicants who perform well on this procedure will perform well on the job" and "…this procedure measures the skills necessary to perform well on the job" (2010: 22). No evidence was provided to verify the accuracy of these statements – the predictive validity was perceived rather than actual. Carless (2007) used job analysis and access to training as proxies for effective selection.

There is continued usage of HR practices such as unstructured interviews that are not supported by evidence based research (Highhouse, 2008; Lievens & Paepe, 2004). Huffcutt (2011) argues the importance of understanding how interviews can predict performance and identifying strategies to

increase validity. He argues that empirical research has not been well integrated due to a lack of a conceptual framework and proposes one that includes: declarative knowledge (what), procedural skills & abilities (how) and motivation (how much effort) - W+H+E= Performance. This framework omits the contextual, or 'fit,' factors that influence performance which are included in the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) model from Boxall & Purcell (2011).

Huffcutt (2011) challenges the meta-analytic finding that structured interviews are more valid than unstructured interviews. Lockyer & Scholarios (2004) demonstrate the importance of understanding the organisational context and the local labour market. An example of the use of interviews is that assessment of communication skills for managers was largely by inference from selection interviews (Bambacas & Patrickson, 2009). Evidence based practice is not one size fits all: it is the best current evidence coupled with informed expert judgment (Rousseau, 2006).

As good execution may be as important as the strategic choices managers make (Rousseau, 2006), the training and attitudes to selection techniques of graduate interviewers may provide insight into choices organisations make in designing selection processes (Highhouse, 2008; Rynes, Barber & Varma, 2000). There is an assumption that selection techniques are effectively implemented which particularly applies to structured interviews and assessment centres. Firms may use structured interviews poorly because of lack of planning; including a lack of a thorough job analysis (Carless, 2009), resources allocated and because interviewers are not adequately skilled or even trained in selection techniques. This illustrates the importance of the relationship between the HR function and line managers (Brandl, Madsen & Madsen, 2009; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007) who participate in the graduate selection process. The key qualities required of graduate interviewers include: strong interpersonal skills; enthusiasm for company; knowledge of company and jobs & credibility with applicants and co-workers. Interview training is not always provided and can average less than one and a half days (Carless, 2007). The capability of interviewers to accurately rate against the criteria, recognising and filtering out impression tactics and to distinguish between applicants is not clear (Huffcutt, 2011).

Internationally, there are differing approaches to selection. Konig et al (2010) did not include structured interviews in a questionnaire to Swiss HR managers as "…practically nobody uses highly structured interviews" (2010: 21). UK HR Practitioners differ in different rank order of selection techniques than those in the US with unstructured interviews, references and application being the top three (same as Di Milia, 2004 for Australian managerial selection practices). The US top three are references, structured interview and drug tests (Furnham, 2008). In Australia, the majority of graduate employers used application forms, interviews and one other selection technique (Carless, 2007).

Australian firms are increasingly using psychological tests due to a growing belief that testing is a component of contemporary practice (Carless et al, 2009). There is limited understanding of internal processes from personality, as an indicator of predisposition to certain behaviours, to job outcomes (Bartram, 2004). Personality may play a more important role in low- structure interviews than in high-structure interviews (Huffcutt, 2011). Additional techniques include realistic job previews to provide applicants with a detailed and informed impression and can be implemented in a number of ways, including workplace try outs (Breaugh, 2010; Konig et al, 2010). Reference checks can be used but there is little analysis of how this data contributes to selection decisions (Carless, 2007).

Huffcutt (2011) suggests three potentially important findings from his review of the literature: social skills and verbal expression show a strong correlation with interview ratings; triple combination of interviewing experience, motivation & self-efficacy play a stronger role than generally recognised; and, job knowledge correlates higher than GMA.

Applicant reactions

Selection interviews are interactive social processes where the relative behaviours of applicants and interviewers play an important role (Macan, 2009). Huffcutt's (2011) literature review concluded that the social skills of interviewees (as distinct from answer content) and personal characteristics (such as attractiveness) can influence ratings. The use of self-promotion and impression management and

ingratiation is common in selection interviews and contributes to interview outcomes (Higgins & Judge 2004). Non-verbal behaviour is often commented on by members of interview panels – includes, gaze, smile, hand movement and body orientation (Lievens & Peters, 2008). Carless suggests graduates are "…well versed in answering standard interview questions" (2007: 162) as interview training/practice can improve the accuracy of interview ratings (Huffcutt, 2011).

Applicant reactions to selection procedures suggest that negative experiences have resulted in applicants withdrawing from the selection process (Konig et al, 2010; Parris & Saville, 2011). Applicant reactions to popular methods of employee selection *most preferred* (work samples, interviews), *favourably evaluated* (resumes, cognitive tests, references, biodata, personality inventories), and *least preferred* (honesty tests, personal contacts, graphology) (Anderson, Salgado & Hülsheger, 2010).

Graduate selection research in Australia

A high volume of graduate applicants increases the scale of logistics and administration of the selection process (Branine, 2008). Differing operations, size, and needs of organisations means there is no "one right way", or even "best" process to follow, in order to achieve optimal selection outcomes (Sackett & Lievens, 2008).

The Australian published graduate selection studies both had 50 usable responses to surveys sent to graduate employers (Carless, 2007; Johns et al, 2007). This research plus AAGE (2011) and Di Milia (2004) indicate the range of selection practices used by Australian graduate employers. However, the reasons for the choice of techniques (Konig et al, 2010), their relative weight in selection decisions and how they predict graduate employee performance have not been subject to published research. Additionally, HR "managers" who respond to such surveys have an interest in "defending" the validity of the processes they use which may produce "socially desirable" responses (Huffcutt, 2011; Rynes et al, 2002). Additionally, the predictive validity of selection procedures was not rated as important in the choice of procedures used by organisations (Konig et al 2010).

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The most recent AAGE 2011 survey (conducted in August & September 2010) suggests 90% of graduate employers use behavioural based interviews. More than 70% assess team working, problem solving & analytical skills. Over 80% said oral communication, teamwork and interpersonal and problem solving skills were very important components in selection process. As shown in Table 1, University grades were only the sixth highest assessed competencies and the second lowest rank of the competencies marked as 'very important'.

(Insert Table 1 about here).

There is a continued reliance on unstructured interviews which have poor predictive validity due to primacy, recency, homo-social reproduction effects and non-verbal behaviour impacting interviewer ratings. This suggests that selection processes are not performed scientifically. Johns et al (2007) reported that Australian graduate selectors order the importance of selection tools as interview, personality test, group discussion and presentation (with a focus on communication) and usefulness of selection tools as interview, group discussion and presentation rated (personality tests not presented in results).

Methodology

The study sought to address the 'how' and 'why' questions of graduate selection by adopting a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989; Konig et al, 2010; Teo, Lakhani, Brown, & Malmi, 2008). Surveys have concentrated on large organisations with postal methodology, low response rates and don't explain why differences in practices occur (Bartram, 2004). Research questions (and findings) become more important and more relevant if the research is conducted in conjunction with organisational members (Latham, 2007).

Utilising semi-structured interviews permitted clarification of responses and the reasons behind the organisations' approaches to graduate selection. Interview questions were derived, in part, from Carless (2007) and AAGE (2011) with a focus on obtaining information about the:

- Types of graduates sought and the graduate selection process currently being used;

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- Reasons for the process, the qualifications/ experience of the interviewers/decision makers; and,

- Extent of reference to academic research.

After obtaining ethical approval for this preliminary research, firms who participated in one University's Careers' Fair seeking accounting, business, law or engineering graduates were contacted for inclusion in the study. A total of twelve semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes duration were conducted: two with experienced recruitment consultants and ten with graduate recruiters. Six of the firms have a national/international focus with four primarily operating in one state. With the consent of the participants, the interviewers were digitally recorded. Basic demographic information on the organisations and participants involved is contained in Table 2.

(Insert Table 2 about here).

As recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), tapes of the interviews were transcribed as soon as possible. The data was coded into the key themes identified in the literature review using NVivo (version 9.0). From the key themes, indicative quotes from participants were selected on the basis of frequency and strength of language.

Results and Findings

There was clear recognition of the importance of utilising an effective selection process *"…because the graduate programme involves a lot of time and energy it is important to end up with a good and rounded decision"* Respondent Number 5 (R5). The aim of the process is "*…get it right. The interview is used to verify technical skills, confirm details on the CV, and assess motivations for position (and future positions)",* R1. Overall, the main structure of the graduate selection programmes was similar. All firms used applications for short-listing and face to face interviews. Only one firm (the largest) had a specific minimum grade point average. Applicants failing a small number of units was not an impediment provided they had overall satisfactory results. Four of the larger firms included some form of numerical and verbal reasoning test. None of the firms conducted personality tests.

The responses to a question about what techniques are the best predictors of future graduate performance included: "*The short assessment centre is most useful but the interview is not a strong guide to future performance*", R6; "*…the overall approach combining testing and the behavioural interviews to assess behaviours that fit our competencies and values*", R7; and "*…academic results and the group discussion are the best predictors*", R9.

All of the firms conducted face-to-face interviews with the first interview being a panel interview, normally with two people – one HR and one line manager. Ten of the twelve participants specifically described their firms' interview approach as behavioural. There was a clearly expressed focus on person-organisational fit with the interviews playing a central role in providing information on this criterion. *"We use behavioural interviews looking for examples of past behaviour. We are looking for attitude and cultural fit with the team*", R2. "*The second interview is more formal with a (senior manager). This interview involves discussing the actual position in more depth, to identify and confirm a team/cultural fit…and identify their commitment to the potential role*", R11.

The participants indicated that approaches to graduate selection were based on incremental changes and designed to produce graduates with a good P-O fit. The participants explained that this was the reason for the practice of holding two interviews with applicants and for including more informal practices such as "*…being invited to a …cocktail function away from work premises with a range of staff from previous graduates to senior* (managers). *Each gives feedback post-event which is equal weighted*". R5. "*Part of the second round also includes a short site tour that is normally conducted with a recent graduate*", R7.

Three firms used forms of assessment centres with the most detailed approach being "*…a short ice-breaker, a group problem solving activity where we are looking for team-work, and a one-to-one interview with question based on (the firm's) competency framework*", R4. There was a mixed response to using reference checks which reflects, in part, that graduating students generally lack relevant work experience.

Apart from tertiary studies, only two participants had received structured training in selection techniques. Two HR functions provided selection guidelines to line managers whilst for the remainder "*…there is no specific training for those involved in graduate selection interviews"*, R6. While most of the participants indicated they read HR literature, only three mentioned academic journals such as the Asia-Pacific Journal of Human Resources. None of the participants indicated that their or their firm's selection practices had been influenced by academic literature.

Responses to the question about the relative contribution of the selection techniques to the decision included: "*…twenty percent application, sixty percent interview and twenty percent references",* R12 and "*…o*rganisation fit is about sixty percent and technical capacity is forty percent". R6

Discussion and implications

A minority of the participants had formal training in selection practices or selection interviewing skills beyond that of undergraduate courses in human resource management. Skills in selection, particularly interviews were obtained through guidance from more experienced members of the firm and from practice. A strong implication from the interview comments that selection is seen, not as a science, but rather as a craft. This is consistent with Rousseau's (2006) conclusion that good management is an art rather than a science and Highhouse's (2008) conclusion that interviewers prefer to rely on intuition which can be developed through experience. Perhaps, this is a contributing factor to why the practitioners did not access scientific research on selection. Whilst there had been little explicit evaluation of the selection processes, the participants were generally comfortable, within resource availability, of the current processes being used.

The limitations of this research are that it involved a small number of interviews examining graduate selection in a single year with a focus on graduate employment in a single Australian State. More extensive and longitudinal research that tracks graduate applicants through the selection process and into

their career to assess which of the selection techniques made positive contributions to higher performing graduates could provide more extensive evidence of the validity of selection practices.

The implications for academics teaching/learning in HR is to be relevant to both students as future practitioners and to existing practitioners who may not have completed tertiary study in HR (De Cieri, et al, 2005). There is a challenge for academics to improve the opportunities for practical experience and industry knowledge through work placements, stronger links with industry and increased exposure to the practicalities of work within the curriculum (Parris & Saville, 2011). An implication is that degree programs should have increased focus on key areas assessed by graduate employers such as team work, critical thinking and public speaking (AAGE, 2011; Johns, et al, 2007).

For researchers, the results suggest that research findings be communicated in the language of 'manager' rather than in 'academic' (Carless et al, 2009). Research questions (and findings) become more important and more relevant if the research is conducted in conjunction with organisational members (Latham, 2007). Implementing an evidenced based approach not only can improve graduate selection outcomes but can contribute to more effective leadership and managerial decisions that influence organisational and individual goals (Rousseau, 2006).

These preliminary findings confirm a low impact from academic research in Australian graduate selection practices and a lack of structured training in selection techniques; consistent with Guest (2007) and Highhouse (2008). The larger firms appear to be increasing the use of tests and assessment centres, which given the increased focus on employment of talented graduate employees; suggest practitioners may wish to review their reliance on application forms and interviews.

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Table 1: Assessed Competencies in Australian Graduate Selection

Competency	Assessed (%)	Very Important (%)	Quite Important (%)	Not very important (%)
Teamwork	74	90	9	1
Problem solving skills	71	82	17	1
Analytical skills	71	74	25	1
Oral communication	70	88	12	-
Interpersonal skills	69	85	15	-
University grades	65	46	45	9
Written communication	64	73	25	2
Planning and organising	61	61	38	1
Time Management	52	66	31	3
Conceptual thinking	50	61	36	3
Leadership	50	45	44	11

This table shows competencies assessed by at least 50% of employers who responded to the 2010 AAGE Employer's survey. (Thanks to AAGE for permission to use this extract from Table 7.2: 89). Source: Australian Association of Graduate Employers (AAGE). 2011. *The AAGE Employers Survey 2011.* Australian Association of Graduate Employers Ltd: Mitcham, Victoria.

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Table 2: Demographic information of Respondents/Firms

Interviews: 12	2 Recruitment consultants,	10 graduate employers
Gender	Men: 4	Women: 8
Years of Selection experience: 112	Men average: 14.75	Women average: 6.375
Graduate Employers: 6 x National/International operations 4 x State based	1 x Federal Public Sector 1 x State Public Sector 1 x State based GBE	7 x Professional Service Organisations 5 x National 2 x State based
Graduates employed per year	National organisations Range: 10-200	State based organisations Range: 4-20