

What do graduate employers want in a Curriculum Vitae? Designing a student-friendly CV rubric that captures employer consensus

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Abstract

The ability of an individual to effectively articulate their potential to a graduate employer can be seen as an important aspect of employability. This is commonly achieved by students and graduates using a Curriculum Vitae (CV). The challenge for careers professionals offering advice, guidance and designing and delivering activities that aim to teach individuals to produce effective CVs is the lack of UK-based research into what makes a CV effective.

Rubrics are commonly used in higher education to assess student work. A rubric is typically composed of dimensions that describe a task, levels of achievements and descriptors. They can be useful to career professionals, students and graduates as they can clearly communicate the criteria of a task and be used for evaluation and assessment.

The aim of this research project was to create a user-friendly rubric for CVs that was informed by the views of UK graduate employers. Specifically, identifying the elements of a CV that would lead to shortlisting and those that would lead to rejection.

41 semi-structured interviews, using a strategy of interpretive enquiry, were conducted with graduate employers representing a range of sectors. Themes were identified by the researchers and independently by a research assistant supported by the use of NVivo. The researchers employed the four stages of rubric creation described by Stevens & Levi (2005) to create a CV rubric.

This project confirmed several widely accepted UK CV conventions, including the ideal length of a CV (two sides) and not including a photo. There were also several surprises including employers preferring CVs written in the first person and the use of addresses to assess mobility of applicants.

A CV rubric was created with two levels of performance (Shortlist/Reject) to reflect the two possible outcomes from an application. Guidelines to accompany the rubric, informed by the views of graduate employers, were also produced.

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1. Introduction

1.1. What is a rubric?

A rubric is an instrument that is commonly used in higher education to provide formative and summative assessment and feedback on academic and performance related tasks. They have a variety of formats and commonly include a scale that indicates a level of achievement; for example Excellent, Good, Mixed etc., dimensions of a task; a breakdown of the elements involved in the task and descriptors of what constitutes each level of achievement on the scale. This would be set out on a grid with the dimensions occupying the Y-axis and the scale occupying the X-axis (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

Rubrics have been associated with many distinct benefits, for example, reducing the time taken to provide feedback to students. The importance of timely feedback has been shown to have an effect on learning, the more timely, the more learning is facilitated (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Because descriptors are used to clearly communicate expectations and these are expressed in a way that links to performance, rubrics can be seen to be a fairer and more open method of assessment (Higher Education Academy, 2015). This is because rubrics allow for greater consistency in assessment as expectations are clearly communicated in the descriptors of the rubric (Stevens & Levi, 2005). Because rubrics clearly express the requirements for performance at the highest level of achievement, the related descriptors can be used to improve feedback to students (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

There is a body of research exploring the use of rubrics to assess employability; however the focus is on measurement of skill acquisition, for example Riebe & Jackson, 2014; Parratt, et al., 2016. A literature review conducted using Library Search returned no results in terms of rubrics constructed specifically for CV assessment. A further search conducted using the AGCAS (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) Journal, *Phoenix*, revealed again no relevant results.

1.2. The context

The employability of graduates is of key strategic importance within higher education as graduate employment rates are an integral part of what is considered as success of a university (Higher Education Statistic Agency, 2010) and are used in the formulation of important university league tables.

One aspect of employability can be seen as an individual's potential to secure a graduate job (Yorke, 2006) and this potential is often communicated to employers, in response to a job opportunity, with a Curriculum Vitae (CV). In the UK, in a survey of 579 employers, CVs were the most commonly used application method (Zibarras, 2010) and in terms of graduate recruitment a survey of 156 employers found that again CVs are the most popular application method (Branine, 2015). Even with certain larger graduate employers investigating and utilising alternate and novel methods as alternatives to the CV (Rogers, 2018) a significant amount of students will require a CV to access the graduate jobs market, particularly those applying to smaller employers (Pollard, et al., 2015).

For the HECSU (Higher Education Careers Service Unit) report, *Improving remote CV feedback using screencasting* (Simkins & Coney, 2018), in order to assess learning gain, we required a formal method of assessment that accurately described the concept and construct of a CV at its varying levels of achievement. A rubric was created through a Delphi design that enlisted careers professional work colleagues, as a community of a practice, experts and co-creators. Using career professionals' expertise to inform the construction of an assessment for CVs met one facet of the HEA's recommendations for improving (transforming) assessment through innovation "*being characterised as authentic or work relevant, involving employers or experts in the assessment process*" (HEA, 2015, p. 3). As a result of the study we wanted to take our research one step further and involve graduate employers.

There is very little research into CVs, and what research there is is centred in the US and on the slightly different (in terms of conventions, format and structure) resumé (Yates, 2014). A review of the literature available in the Careers and Employability Centre (at Keele) in the form of books, specifically written to support students to construct their

CVs contain no reference to research to support advice on how to approach this task. This means that the assessment of CVs is often based upon collective wisdom, accepted conventions which could be defined as consensus and experience; for example through discussions with employers and a feeling of what works or has worked in the past; in terms of securing interviews. It can be argued, then, that an individual's ability to assess a CV and offer meaningful feedback depends upon their level of expertise. Graduate employers who assess CVs have an acknowledged expertise in this area. Using employer expertise to inform and involve them in constructing an assessment for CVs meets one of the HEA's recommendations for improving (transforming) assessment through innovation "being characterised as authentic or work relevant, involving employers or experts in the assessment process" (Higher Education Academy, 2015, p. 4).

1.3. Research question

What do graduate employers want in a CV? Designing a student-friendly CV rubric that captures employer consensus.

The aim of the project was to add to and/or confirm our wider careers and employability community's knowledge of the elements that make up an effective CV. In terms of the impact it is hoped that it will contribute (in a small way) to addressing the identified issue of the lack of research into UK graduate employer expectations around an effective CV. A rubric was created to capture and communicate graduate employer consensus that can be used by career professionals in advice and guidance and in a format that is accessible to students and graduates.

2. Methodology

For this project, the researchers were keen to obtain the perspectives of employers who are involved in recruiting students and graduates and who use CVs as part of their recruitment process and so opted for semi-structured interviews. As mentioned by McAteer (2013, p. 73), interviews are *“particularly useful in helping the researcher to ‘get inside’ the story”*; she adds that semi-structured interviews (where there are some guideline questions but there is also flexibility in the wording and ordering of these questions), *“allow both the researcher and the participant the freedom through which to explore an honest and authentic account”*.

During the interviews with the employers, the researchers used a strategy of interpretive enquiry, described by Thomas (2013, p. 202) as where *“you let the ideas emerge from your immersion in a situation rather than going in with fixed ideas about what is happening”*. This approach involved asking open questions, followed by probing questions to explore themes, in addition to closed questions to ascertain specific quantitative elements (such as the length of time spent reading a CV). As the two researchers were both conducting the interviews, this interpretive approach involved briefly analysing the data after each interview and communicating with each other, to describe emerging themes which could then be further explored in subsequent interviews (and updating the list of questions accordingly). The latest list of questions used can be found in the Appendix; this includes the ‘shortlist’ and ‘reject’ grid which participants were asked to comment on.

All interviews were recorded and the transcripts were analysed. A thematic analysis was carried out by both researchers and a research assistant (the latter used NVivo); these analyses were then compared, and trends and emerging themes were noted.

2.1. Sample

The sample for this study comprised of 41 employers. The researchers emailed all organisations who had advertised roles with Keele Careers and Employability in the past two years to invite them to participate in the study. The 41 employers in the sample were those who responded to this email and who were willing to be contacted via telephone to participate in a semi-structured interview (lasting approximately 20-30 minutes). Within this sample, there was a range in size of organisation (from SME to large international organisation) and also in sector, from the pharmaceutical industry to education. The sample also included representation from both the public and private sectors.

At the analysis stage, the researchers carried out a sifting exercise based on actual use of CVs in the recruitment of students and graduates by the employer representative interviewed, which reduced the number of transcripts to be analysed down to 37.

2.2. Quality considerations

The researchers who conducted this study are careers consultants and, as such, it is possible that there is bias in this study, due to the preconceived ideas the researchers may have had about CVs. Related to this, there was also a danger of experimenter-expectancy effects during the interviews, where the researchers might have inadvertently conveyed expectations about the findings to the research participants (who, as described by Thomas (2013) may then, consciously or unconsciously, have conformed to the lead we appeared to have given). In order to minimise the impact of this bias, the researchers recruited a research assistant to be a ‘critical friend’ and to carry out an independent thematic analysis.

By inviting all organisations who had recently advertised roles through Keele Careers and Employability, the researchers did not control the sample to be used for this research project. This contributes to the transferability of this study and the extent to which the findings can be generalised in other contexts. Despite the fact that there were two researchers conducting the semi-structured interviews, the same questions sheets were used; in addition, the researchers consulted each other between interviews and as themes emerged, agreed how to update the questions sheets they would use with subsequent interviews (in line with the adopted interpretive approach described in section 1). This process was carried out to achieve a good inter-rater reliability. By participating in discussions about this study with members of the Careers and Employability team, the researchers have sought to obtain dialogic validity.

2.3. Creating a CV rubric

Stevens & Levi (2005) note that collaborative rubric construction can often make rubrics more effective as assessment tools; in this study, the researchers created a rubric that was informed by graduate employer consensus.

When considering the construction of a rubric, Stevens and Levi (2005) define four stages: *reflecting* (thinking about what is required), *listing* (outlining the details and considering what it is hoped will be achieved by the rubric), *grouping and labelling* (organising the results of the first two stages, grouping similar concepts together) and *application* (forming the rubric in a grid format). In this study, the 'reflecting' stage was carried out at the beginning and involved the researchers identifying the elements involved in writing a CV and the number of levels of achievement. To emulate the dichotomous nature of recruitment decisions the researchers decided to produce a rubric grid with two levels of achievement, "Shortlist" or "Reject". The second stage ('listing') was accomplished by conducting the semi-structured interviews with the employers, in order to obtain a first-hand view on what recruiters think should be achieved by the creation of a CV. The third 'grouping and labelling' stage was carried out during the analysis stage of the study, where the data was thematically analysed and similar concepts related to performance expectations were grouped together. Finally, based on the three former stages, the researchers conducted the final 'application' stage, which involved transferring this information into a rubric grid in the form of the descriptors for each element/level of performance. This rubric can be seen in chapter 5 of this report.

3. Results

3.1. Accessing the CV

Initially all employers stated that they would access applicant CVs through a computer, they would then either print out the CV to read or view the CV on their computer; this was influenced by the size of employer with large employers with a large volume of applicants less likely to print out the CV.

In terms of how employers processed the CVs and shortlisted, a theme emerged of "*key words*". Employers actively looked for selection criteria information related to the requirements for the role and either did this by scanning the whole CV for key words and phrases and/or accessed the CV by looking firstly at a specific section of the CV; the most common sections for employers to access like this were the Education/Qualifications, the Employment/Work Experience and the Personal Profile.

"Probably first look is really quick because you're doing that quick scan, have they got the main things that we're looking for? And then you do a second probably more detailed read. So maybe two or three minutes? Five minutes? But I'd probably do that scan to accept or reject probably within about 15 seconds."

A handful of employers used computerised Applicant Tracking Systems that allow them to use Boolean search terms, AND, NOT and OR, to identify pre-selected key words in applicant CVs. Those CVs that did not contain these keywords are automatically screened out of the process. Employers used either a formal process, such as a check list or matrix to identify candidates for shortlisting or an informal process where the CV was used for an overall assessment of the candidate. A theme emerged of the “killer criteria”, these are criteria that are essential for the role

3.2. Time spent reading CV

Employers were asked to state how long they tend to spend reading a CV before making a decision about that applicant regarding selection; as can be seen in figure 1, there was a real range in the responses given. As can be seen, the most popular response was 3 to 5 minutes; however, the time periods range from less than half a minute to 30 minutes. Some employers explained that the length of time actually depends on the quality of the CV: less time would be spent on those the employer did not like. For example, one said:

“It could be anywhere from 5 minutes to 15 minutes...if I don’t like what I see in the first instance, I’ll probably spend a few minutes quickly looking through it, trying to find relevant points and then perhaps discard it.”



3.3. Length of CV

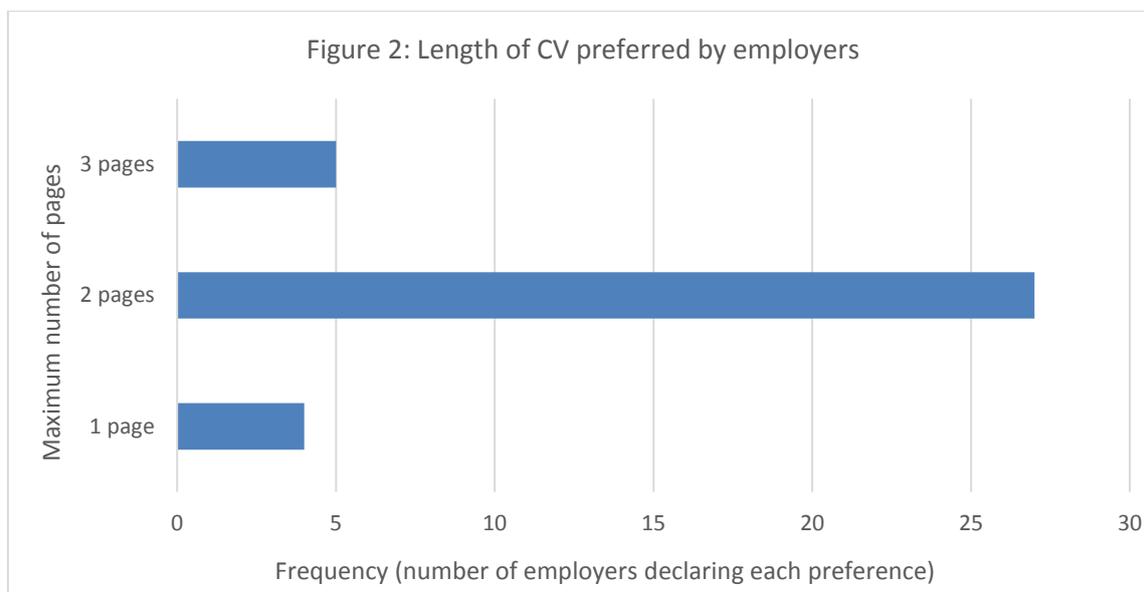
When employers were asked about the length of CV they would expect to see, as shown in figure 2, the majority stated that a maximum of two sides was preferred. Employers opting for this length explained their reasons with phrases such as:

“I’d probably only read the first two pages” and “I think two pages is about right. I think any more and it’s just irrelevant. We don’t have very long to read each CV, so if we are having to sift through three to four pages of waffle then it’s quite frustrating.”

Several employers felt that one page was enough; one stated, *“if someone was coming out of university with more than one page of CV, I’d be slightly concerned about their ability to write succinctly.”* Some employers did not have a strong opinion on the number of pages a CV should be in length. One employer stated:

“What you want them (the applicants) to be doing is telling you the things that are really relevant...if you can say them in a page, say them in a page. If you need three pages, take three pages. It’s not about the length per se, it’s about what’s in there that’s more important.”

Several employers noted that whilst applicants with large amounts of experience may require more than two pages to include all relevant information, this was unlikely to apply to students or recent graduates.



3.4. Getting a sense of the applicant’s character from their CV

A strong theme emerged of the CV as a *“first impression”*, this compares to research that indicates the potential for a resume to create a strong first impression of a candidate (Knouse, 1994). Initially this impression is linked to the layout, appearance and typographical accuracy in terms of spelling, grammar and formatting of the CV; *“The first thing that hits you is the appearance, then how accurate, before you even read the content”*. For opportunities that receive a high volume of applications this initial impression could affect whether the CV is looked at in depth or not, although the majority of employers reported that they would still look at a CV even if this initial impression was poor. Although this initial impression could be important for applicants the content is where employers in the study reported developing their overall first impression; *“the layout may initially attract but it still needs the content”*.

The language used by employers illustrates this unanticipated theme of using CVs to obtain a sense of the applicant’s character. One said about a CV: *“it gives you a flavour of what you might get.”* Several employers felt that the personal profile element of the CV in particular aided them in gaining a sense of the character of the applicant; one stated: *“it gives sort of a little bit of a window into personality...”*, another said about the profile: *“it does put forward a little more that person and who they are and what’s important to them”*. Others stated that the hobbies and interests section helped them to gain understanding of the applicant; one said about this section of the CV: *“it’s nice to get more of an idea of the personality of a person and what they’re into”*, another stated *“sometimes on CVs they put interests and hobbies and that gives you a little bit of a sense of who the person is more intimately”*.

One related theme mentioned by several employers was the challenge of trying to differentiate between applicants who are all recent graduates, with similar qualifications and similar levels of work experience. One employer described this challenge relating to graduate applicants’ CVs:

“...a lot of them start to look the same after a while...(so) I look to see what a person’s like...you know, what their interests are, what kind of personality...generally you can get a feel, you know, if someone will fit in your team or what kind of character they might bring...”

This idea of an applicant fitting into an organisation’s culture is mentioned by another employer: *“So many employers now, ourselves included, are looking for that cultural fit...”*. This particular employer followed this statement by suggesting that an indicator of this fit is what activities the applicant has been involved in whilst at university (societies, sports, etc.).

Unfortunately for applicants, a number of employers also made negative assumptions about applicants, based on elements of their CVs. In particular, where CVs had spelling or grammatical errors, several employers described assumptions they might make about the applicant. For example, one employer stated: *“it flags to me that perhaps their attention to detail isn’t fantastic”*. Another employer mentioned presentation as something which they would make assumptions about: *“presentation says a lot to me about how somebody cares about their work...sloppy presentation could signify lots of different things...”*. Yet another employer was concerned that that the personal profile section might be misleading for recruiters (and for this reason did not think this section should be included in an applicant’s CV): *“I think sometimes, depending on the mindset of the person...they might have a preconceived idea of what this person is like”*.

However, several employers noted that the sense of a person they may have gained from a CV can be incorrect, or incomplete. One employer stated: *“sometimes a shining star whose CV is just really bad”*. Another mentioned that although there are some indications about a person from their CV, this is limited until a conversation can be carried out with the applicant: *“I can tell whether they have attention to detail...I can tell whether they seem like they are outgoing because they’ve a lot of stuff on their (CV)...but actually I don’t think until you’ve had a phone call with someone you really get a sense of what somebody is like as a person.”*

3.5. First/Third person

When the employers were asked if they preferred to read a CV written in first or third person, there was a mixed response. The most popular choice was for the CV to be written in the first person, with over half of the employers stating that they would prefer this. One stated *“I think it’s more personal”*, another noted: *“it sounds a bit odd in the third person”*, although they added that they understood that this form could help people (perhaps those who are less confident) to write about themselves. A smaller proportion of those interviewed stated that they preferred CVs to be written in the third person; interestingly, one employer gave the reason for their preference as the point mentioned above: *“it’s easier for people, particularly culturally for the British, to brag about themselves in the third person...some people can’t say ‘I am...’, but they can say ‘he is great’”*. Finally, several employers stated that they did not have a preference, responding with comments such as *“it doesn’t matter...it’s irrelevant”*.

3.6. Photos

Although it is uncommon in the UK for a CV to include a photograph of the candidate, it is a convention in other countries to include one. The majority of employers did not respond positively to the inclusion of a photograph and acknowledged the potential for discrimination and bias if one was included in a CV:

“It’s not great, it just goes against everything around being objective in your recruitment process. And students don’t always use the most appropriate photos, so then it’s also very misleading, there’s no need for them. I don’t know why they’re putting them in there.”

Several employers also said how the inclusion of a photo in a CV would make them feel:

“I don’t like photographs on CVs, that makes me uncomfortable, but that’s from an equality and diversity point of view and we never ask that people do. I am very uncomfortable with it, I’m not comfortable with it at all.”

A photo could be detrimental in terms of a candidate's impression management, the attempt by an individual to manage the impression someone else has of them;

"You instantly get an impression of the person from the photo, and I don't necessarily think that's a very good thing. It can obviously have a halo and horns effect into the perceptions you have around that person, and we feel that's a really wrong starting point for the student, regardless of whether it's a good photo or not"

One employer gave an example of this "halo and horn" effect; *"She did herself no favours, 'cos you could tell from the photograph the make-up was so piled on you thought blooming heck, she's not going to want to work in xxx...that creates that impression"*.

3.7. Contact details

Employers were asked if they wanted full addresses to be included in the CVs that they receive. The majority of employers said that they did not require full contact details, however these employers did want to know the postcode or city that the applicant lived in. There was a strong theme of the potential **mobility** of applicants and the use of the address by employers to evaluate this, employers wanted to know where an applicant lived to judge whether it was either within commutable distance or whether a relocation would be necessary. For some employers this was just a matter of "logistics" and would not affect hiring decisions:

"It won't affect whether they get hired or not but it would make us, before we send the offer through just go through with them in terms of logistics, would they be requiring to move. Do they need a bit of extra time for that. We operate shifts. If they do work quite far away and they're commuting would the shifts work for them. So again, it's not going to be a deterrent but it's just so we know logistics."

However a significant minority did indicate that the location of the applicant could have an affect;

"No at that stage if it's only the city or village where they live that's enough to say okay they have x amount of commuting time, this is too long or yes it's doable".

Only two employers said that they did not require details that would identify where the applicant lived:

"You don't really need anything more than your email address and your phone number. I don't need to know address, I don't need to know your term time address or home address, if I need that address information I will contact you separately and get it. So I like to keep it nice and short at the top, name, email and mobile number".

3.8. Personal Profile

The employers' responses regarding whether they would like to see a personal profile (summary statement) at the beginning of a CV were to some extent in agreement that they would, with nearly three quarters stating that they like CVs to include this element. Reasons for this included that *"straight away you can get a feel for that person"* and *"it's a nice little intro to what's coming after that...like a pitch piece before you go into the nitty gritty of their experience..."*. Many of the employers who were keen to see a personal profile included advice regarding this section: *"keep it short"*, it should be *"tailored...to (show how they) meet the core requirements of the job"* and *"I want three lines: who you are, what you can do and what you are looking for"*. One employer noted that a personal profile can be a helpful summary for those recruiters who are short of time: *"sometimes they haven't got time to read everything else in the CV; (the personal profile) is a summary of who they are and the key skills they can bring to that particular role"*.

A couple of employers stated that they like to see the personal profile in written prose rather than bullet points; one explained: *"that's an opportunity for them to show their ability to construct a sentence and to get something across that's succinct but also tells a story of them"*. However, another employer stated about the personal profile: *"I have to see it in bullet points and as clear as possible and that's how a CV will stand out for me"*.

Several employers felt that the information included in a personal profile could instead be situated in a covering letter. Two employers stated that they did not mind which of these elements (i.e. personal profile or covering letter) contained this information, providing it was present; one said, *“as long as it’s in there somewhere”*.

However, as mentioned, approximately one quarter of employers stated that they did not wish to see a personal profile on a CV. This largely appears to be due to the assertions made by applicants about their skills or experience in this section, without necessarily including the evidence to substantiate these claims. One said: *“I don’t read it – it’s always the same jargon, to be honest”*; another stated *“I think they’re a bit ‘cringy’. These statements seem so empty”*.

3.9. Extra-curricular activities

Employers as a whole were positive about inclusion in a CV of information relating to extra-curricular activities. Employers did differ in terms of how they would utilise this information and through analysis three distinct uses were identified. Employers saw this information as a way of standing out from other applicants; *“She’s moving freight for a very well-known company, real, real macho world, she’s got a degree in Fine Art, why did we hire her? Because she was the coach of the cheerleading thing at Uni.”* Analysis indicated that for an applicant to stand out they would need an experience that went beyond membership to a position of responsibility that could be used to demonstrate either meeting relevant selection criteria or achievements:

“If there’s been wider involvement at university then great, but it has to be targeted. So there again I think it’s got to be achievements. So lots of people would say they’ve had involvement in this society which, for me, means very little, whereas if someone says, ‘I was treasurer of this society, I moved it from a £10k loss to breakeven’, then that’s great. So I think it’s got to be focused”

Employers saw this information as a way of getting a sense of the applicant’s character; *“I like to see what makes a candidate tick and what they are interested in”*. Extra-curricular activities were also seen another way that candidates could demonstrate transferable skills and experience; *“I think the transferable skills you can get from that are really powerful”*.

3.10. Hobbies and Interests

Employers overall were positive about inclusion of this section within an applicant CV. However analysis revealed that this positive response was qualified by whether the hobby and interest served a purpose within the recruitment process and was a section within a CV that was seen as the least important to include.

Employers who were positive about this section but only if it included hobbies that the employer deemed *“interesting”*; *“think about a true hobby, not just try to fill the box. If you don’t have anything interesting to say, just don’t mention anything”*.

This was linked with hobbies and interests having the potential to make candidates distinctive:

“They have more or less the same degree, everyone has done the same skills and so the hobbies make the CV stand out a bit but more importantly it has to be interesting hobbies. I mean just reading, cooking and going out with friends isn’t, that’s basic.”

Some of the examples given by employers of hobbies or interests that would be *“interesting”* or distinctive could be said to be experiences that would typically be included elsewhere in the CV; for example *“volunteering”*, *“team captains”* and (student) *“societies”*.

Employers also saw this section as another way to assess a candidate’s character and personality:

“Big fan, I like to get a personal insight into the applicant, what they do away from work, what they do away from their professional life and that’s something we do ask in the interview, we do like to get to know the candidates on personal level as well.”

One employer who identified their industry and roles as high pressured and intensive used this section to assess candidates’ potential resilience to pressure:

“A lot of CVs just ignore anything to do with hobbies or the individual. We want people to work hard but we want them to work hard and then go and live their life. It’s about working to live not living to work. So someone who’s got an interest outside of work is good. What we do can be quite intense. It’s a deadline-based industry. So there’ll be times when you are working till nine, ten at night. But when they’re not having to do that we want them to be able to switch off a bit and go and play golf or go swimming or go to the chess club or whatever it is. So understanding a bit about the individual is really important for me anyway”.

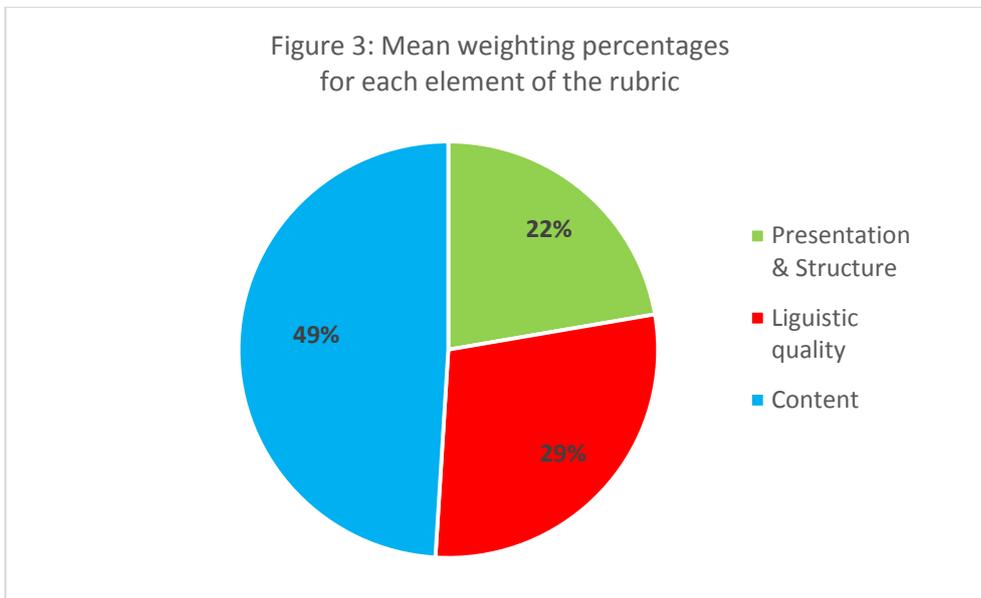
3.11. References

Employers were asked about the preference as to whether they would like full reference details (name, job role and contact details) or “available upon request”. Analysis of the interviews did not reveal a notably strong trend for a preference either way. Those that indicated a preference for full reference details indicated that this was for reasons of convenience; *“...so I know they have them before I interview”*. Some of the employers who indicated “available upon request” suggested that the space on a CV taken up by providing reference details could be better spent on other information, particularly as they do not take up references until after a job offer is made.

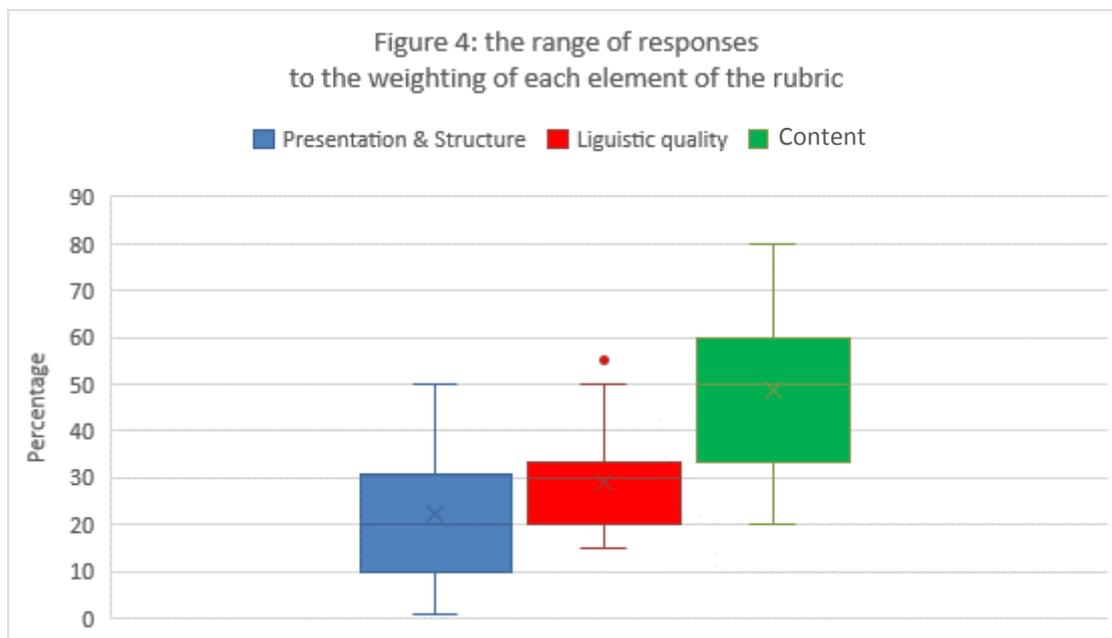
4. The rubric

4.1. Weightings

As part of the semi-structured interviews, the three elements of the CV rubric were described; employers were then asked to give each element a weighting (in terms of a percentage), relating to how important they felt each element was when it came to selecting or rejecting an applicant’s CV. The pie chart in figure 3 shows the mean percentages for each element of the rubric. As can be seen, on average, the employers considered the content of the CV to be the most important (this element had a mean value of 49%), followed by linguistic quality (29%) and lastly presentation and structure (22%).



However, it should be noted that there was a range of opinions regarding the weighting of the elements (an example of this is that the percentage weighting given to the presentation and structure element by the employers varied from 1% to 50%). This variance is shown in the box and whisker diagram in figure 4. In this diagram, the box for each element spans the interquartile range and the vertical lines show the median, or midpoint. The ‘whiskers’ (horizontal lines at either end of the median lines) show the variability, as they are plotted on the highest and lowest values for each element (except for the red dot, which shows an outlier for the linguistic quality element: a data value far away from the other values). Finally, the ‘X’ within each box represents the mean, or average value.



The responses to the question of importance for different elements of a CV provided valuable insights into how employers make judgements on the CVs they receive. One said, “50% for linguistic quality, 40% for content and 10% for structure...because yes, the structure is very important, but if you haven’t got the content right or there’s spelling mistakes, it (structure) really doesn’t make much difference”. Conversely, another described how the presentation and structure were key to how they felt about the CV: “...if it (the presentation and structure) is wrong, then you look at the rest with a negative influence...even if the content is strong but it’s been presented badly, I’ll be thinking the person hasn’t got good attention to detail...”.

Sometimes, the question about weighting appeared to force the employer to consider the way in which they judged CVs and sometimes to question whether it was the best way. One employer stated: *“Content remains (the most important). That said, for bad spelling and grammar, I would reject them...which could be mean, actually. You’re making me question my attitude!”*

4.2. Appropriate presentation and structure

A number of similar responses were given by employers when they were asked what would encourage them to shortlist a CV in terms of presentation and structure. Use of clear headings, a logical order and consistency in structure and presentation were advised. Several employers stated that they wanted CVs to be easy to read and concise, using a simple format. One employer explained: *“I need to be able to make quick, informed decisions on whether I then take people to interview. I therefore need to have information that I need very clearly laid out and very easy to access.”* Another concurred with this: *“You need to be able to scan it really easily. The best way to do that is to have it nicely laid out, nice headers and all in clear sections so that you can just scan through and find stuff nice and easily”.* Several employers stated that bullet points (as noted by one employer, these: *“make it quicker to read”*) and/or short paragraphs were important elements of the format of a CV; one explained *“basically, not long paragraphs, just short and to the point...’cause I haven’t really got time to sit there and read a twenty-line paragraph about their work experience”.*

The font used in a CV was mentioned by several employers. These stated that the font type should remain consistent throughout the CV and be a type which is easy to read, such as Arial. The font size should also be suitable, as described by one employer: *“so, I don’t want it like I’m reading it and it’s that fine print thing and you’ve got to use a magnifying glass...so I want it a good size font. 12’s too big probably, 11’s a bit better”.*

The issue of having a creative CV for certain, relevant roles was mentioned by several employers. One said: *“a nice graphic design element to the CV, that’s nice to have because it makes me stand up and go, “oh, that’s a bit different...it’s not just words on a page, she’s spent a bit of time thinking about the design of the page”...coming from a creative industry, that will attract me to that person if it’s done well”.* However, as acknowledged in the above quote, several employers felt that using graphics on a CV is most suitable for roles where creativity is required, but such graphics should not be included where a role does not require this. One employer stated: *“I’m not a massive fan of flowery borders and pictures and graphics...but I’m not in those industries (such as media communications) ...I understand that that might be different.”*

Several employers indicated that their first impression of a CV was linked to the presentation and structure element. One employer indicated that the structure and the ease with which they could access the information on a CV has an impact on their initial impression: *“Structure is important, I am naturally drawn to those that are easy to access”.* Another employer described that the presentation and structure of a CV could lead them to be positively disposed towards that candidate and more likely to shortlist them for interview: *“..if it looked the way I expected it to look...reasonable and easy to use, it would draw me to it more and I would probably be more lenient if they did not display all the skills that I wanted. I’d think, “oh well, it looks like they know what they’re doing, so I’ll probably interview them anyway”.”*

Conversely, potential consequences of a negative first impression resulting from a poor structure and presentation (such as the CV not being read at all!) were also noted. One employer stated, *“For you to read the CV in the first place, it does have to catch your eye...in order to catch somebodies’ eye, as to what makes this different, a good presentation would be very important”.*

4.3. Linguistic quality and accuracy

In terms of this section of the rubric employers indicated that they valued highly typographical accuracy and in particular spelling, grammar and punctuation. Employers said they would be more likely to shortlist an applicant if the CV was error free; *“well it would be 100% accuracy, most of our job roles involve written work. So it’s very*

annoying isn't it when you get a spelling error?". One employer used a scoring matrix for CVs that included a score for spelling, grammar and punctuation. To score a maximum 4, the CV would need to be completely error free.

Analysis showed that employers were making inferences about applicants based upon these types of errors. Several employers indicated that it implied a lack of attention to detail; *"I really would recommend that students to take time over that because if I see a student who hasn't taken the time and it only takes a couple of seconds to make sure all the details are correct. It flags to me that perhaps their attention to detail isn't fantastic"*.

One employer made inferences about other character traits based upon spelling:

"No I mean you get a sense, I mean with the bad spelling too, even if it is just a typo it shows that the person is not really that organised or that prepared, I mean they haven't even taken the time to go over their CV so it's definitely a huge negative if I see mistakes like that."

Employers were tolerant of one error related to spelling and or grammar giving candidates the benefit of the doubt; *"I don't necessarily think it's one strike and you're out but I would look to see was that a typo. If you've got one mistake in a CV I think it's more likely to be a typo than somebody's inherent style"*. However more than one such error would make it less likely to shortlist to the next round of recruitment with some employers saying that they would see whether the mistake formed a pattern (i.e. repeated) and if this was the case they would be less likely to overlook as it would be less likely to be a typographical error.

Employers who recruited for roles where written communication was particularly important said that they would be more likely to shortlist a CV if it contained content written in full sentences:

"So a couple of sections at least where they've had to write two or more sentences. So normally in the descriptions of previous work experience. And you can see they've written correctly. They've got a good enough command of the English language to be able to write coherent sentences"

In terms of the linguistic quality one employer indicated that they would be more inclined to shortlist a candidate who wrote their CV using professional language. Several employers said that they would be more likely to shortlist a candidate who included "keywords and phrases" from the job advert, with one employer indicating that if these keywords and phrases were highlighted then they would *"absolutely shortlist them straight away"*.

4.4. Content

In relation to the content of a CV the majority of employers indicated that a "tailored" CV would more likely lead to shortlisting, one employer described specifically what they meant by this, including the importance of prioritising relevant information in the structure of the CV and how a tailored CV indicates motivation for the role and employer:

"So my view is that a CV should be tailored to an extent to the job that you're looking for. And I know that people do that if they really want the job with me. So I see the CVs and I think this is just made for me. And it's because they've gone through the CV and gone I'm going to put this at the top because it's more important. Or I'm going to change the profile. So the profile, if you really want the job, change the profile so that it speaks to the employer that this is the person that you want. And you pull the information in from the advert. You understand what they're looking for."

Employers also indicated that inclusion of work experience in a CV would increase the likelihood that a candidate would be shortlisted. However this was qualified by some employers wanting the work experience to be related to the role a candidate is applying for in terms of transferable skills and experience; *"experience which indicates the right skills to be able to perform the job will be weighted much more highly"* and/or achievements:

"You quite often get people who, if they've got some work experience, they take the job description of what they were doing and they list and drop it into their CV. So I know all about the job you did but I don't know very much about you still. I want to know how you did that...so I want delivery based, achievement based..."

Some employers particularly valued part-time employment and indicated that they would have greater confidence of such candidates understanding of work place conventions. These employers also highlighted how part-time work could be used to evidence relevant competencies; *"They work part-time in a shop, well that's good and that's relevant...they're talking to customers"*.

Although some employers indicated that they would be more interested in relevant work experience; *"nothing is more attractive than seeing someone has done the job before"*, these employers also suggested that they understood that for many undergraduates relevant experience might not be possible so they would look to other experiences that could be transferable. For example one employer mentioned a blog; *"...they have a blog, put the link to their blog, things like that are great, especially for this industry (PR). So then that also leads to linguistic accuracy because then I would go onto their blog and look at what they write about and how they write"*.

Employers also want to see evidence of skills in the form of examples and although this can come from work experience, employer mentioned a range of ways this could be achieved; through extra-curricular activities, through their qualifications *"dissertation or significant project to showcase skills"* and volunteering.

Factors that employers said would lead to a CV more likely to be rejected included; *"gaps in history"*, *"wrong degree"*, *"quality of (educational) institution"*, *"no work experience"* and no evidence that candidate meets the *"killer criteria"*.

5. Rubric

The CV rubric produced following the method as described in chapter 2 can be seen on page 19. It is currently configured with two levels of performance, to reflect recruitment decisions, so may not be appropriate for use in academic assessments. It could however be easily adapted for academic use by adding additional levels of performance. For example Excellent (1st), Good (2:1), Mixed (2:2), Poor (3rd), Unsatisfactory (Fail).

The weighting of the elements within the CV rubric are intended to indicate the relative importance of those elements in the recruitment process. This can be used as a discussion point with students and graduates. It is also useful in terms of formative and summative academic assessments.

The researchers have also produced a set of guidelines, intended for users of the rubric (careers professionals, students and graduates). These guidelines are derived from the results of this project and should accompany the CV rubric when it is being used in practice.

The following are recommendations for careers professionals to consider in terms of potential uses for the CV rubric:

- One to one appointments: can be used to communicate clearly the elements of the task of producing a CV, can be used to guide student/graduate in the evaluation of a CV and identify areas for improvement. Can be offered as a handout (with the guidelines).
- CV workshops: could be used for an interactive activity.
- Online: could be added to a careers service website as a downloadable resource.
- Credit bearing employability modules: could be used as is, or with adaptation, as the assessment criteria for submitted CVs.

5.1. The CV rubric

Shortlist	Reject
Appropriate Presentation and Structure- 20%	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective structure in a logical order • Concise, easy to read, using clear headings • Consistency in presentation and formatting • Suitable font type and font size • Inclusion of bullet points within sections for clarity of reading • Use of graphics, if appropriate for demonstrating creativity (if relevant to the role) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of a template, which does not allow for tailoring or prioritising of sections according to the role • Including large paragraphs of text (which employers may see as a 'wall of words'), instead of bullet points • Lack of concise language, including large sentences or 'waffle' • Inconsistencies in formatting, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • varying font type or size <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inappropriate font size (too small or too large) - irregular spacing - lack of clear headings • Use of graphics, when applying for a role which does not require evidence of creativity or design skills
Linguistic quality and accuracy- 30%	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100% accurate in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Spelling -Grammar -Punctuation -Typography • Use of professional language • Use of full sentences (dependent upon role applied for) • Use of key words and/or phrases from the job advert, job description or person specification • Impression management through use of language to create a positive "sense" of candidate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between 2-5 spelling, grammatical, punctuation or typographical errors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -dependent upon role applied for -dependent upon where the errors are situated within the CV -dependent upon whether errors indicate lack of attention to detail rather than typographical errors
Content – 50%	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailored to the role/employer • Work experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Used to demonstrate transferable experience -Used to demonstrate transferable skills and other competencies • Focus on achievements • Extra-curricular activities that demonstrate relevant experience and or skills and competencies for the role applied for i.e. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Positions of responsibility in societies -Team captain roles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications that are related to the role applied for -modules used to demonstrate experience/skill development -Dissertation and or projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A "mass apply" CV that is not tailored for the role/employer • No work experience or comparable evidence • Descriptive rather than related



5.2. Rubric guidelines

For some employers, the first impression they make of an applicant is related to the structure and presentation of their CV, so it is advisable to spend time focusing on this important element.

- **Weighting (%)**

- Each section of the CV rubric has a weighting, expressed as a percentage.
- You can use this to consider the relative importance of an “Appropriate presentation and structure”, “Linguistic quality and accuracy” and “Content”.

- **Sections to consider including:**

Items in each section should be listed in reverse, chronological order.

- Your name as the title of the CV (do not include ‘CV’ written at the top – it is clear to an employer what the document is)
- Contact details (a telephone number and email address are essential; you could also include your address and LinkedIn profile, if you have one)
- Personal profile (a summary statement, located just under your contact details) could be included, as many employers like to read this as an introduction to the CV and to get a sense of who you are and what you are looking for. If you include this section, keep it short (maximum of 2-3 sentences) and ensure that it is tailored to the role you are applying for.
- Education
- Work experience (you may also have a ‘Relevant Work Experience’ section to highlight work carried out which related to the role you are applying for)
- Voluntary work (if you have done this)
- Extra-curricular activities (if you have been involved in a group or society whilst at university; many employers are interested in these activities, particularly if you can describe the skills and abilities you have shown through your involvement. If your activities have involved you taking on responsibilities (e.g., chair, or vice-captain), then you could call this section ‘Additional responsibilities’, or similar – choose the title which best reflects what you have done and which ‘sells’ you most effectively)
- Hobbies and interests (this may be already covered in the Extra-curricular activities section, but if you have any additional pastimes which demonstrate relevant skills or qualities, they are worth describing here).
- Skills You can use a skills section to showcase your relevant skills, this can be particularly effective where the employer requires a range of technical skills. These skills might include IT skills, language skills or laboratory skills. It is best to describe these skills, with examples if possible, to provide the reader with an understanding of your level. Please note that if you feel specific skills are a key selling point for you and are a requirement for the role, this skills section could appear near the beginning of your CV, under the Personal profile section)
- References (adding a statement such as ‘Available on request’ is sufficient; most employers do not expect you to use up value room on your CV providing the contact details)

- **Concise, easy to read, using clear headings**

- Employers sometimes have less than one minute to read a CV and need to scan it quickly, so ensure the information is easy to access by using headings highlighted in bold, with spacing in between each section.

- **Suitable font type and font size**

- Use a font type which is easy to read, such as Arial or Calibri.
- Select a suitable font size, such as 11 or 12.

- **Consistency in presentation and formatting**

- Ensuring that your CV is consistent will assist an employer with accessing the important information with ease. This includes elements such as:
 - making sure that the font remains the same throughout



- checking all sections are aligned to the left, with the same margins
- using regular spacing
- **Inclusion of bullet points within sections for clarity of reading**
 - Another way to help an employer to quickly read the important information on your CV is to use bullet points in each section. Avoid paragraphs as these are harder for the reader to digest and can lead to them being skipped over completely.
- **Use of graphics, if appropriate for demonstrating creativity (if relevant to the role)**
 - If the role you are applying for requires creativity, one way to demonstrate your skills in design is to use graphics on your CV; this can help your CV to stand out.
 - However, if you are not using your CV to apply for a creative role, it is advisable to avoid using graphics, as some employers dislike them.
- **Spelling, grammar, punctuation and typography**
 - Aim for 100% accuracy. Employers see your CV as evidence of your written communication ability.
 - For roles where written communication is particularly important they will have less tolerance for mistakes.
 - Errors can result in an employer making negative inferences about you.
- **Use of full sentences (dependent upon role applied for)**
 - For roles where writing is a substantial component of the role, you should consider including full sentences to evidence your writing ability. Your whole CV does not have to be written in full sentences so this could be the personal profile section.
- **Use of key words and/or phrases from the job advert, job description or person specification**
 - Many employers give your CV a quick scan looking for key words and phrases. When using your CV to provide evidence that you meet their requirements, use the language of the employer and make it easier for them to shortlist you.
- **Tailoring your CV**
 - Employers use your CV to assess your suitability for a role and will be interested in how you meet the requirements that they detail in the job advert.
 - The content can be tailored; headings to sections, use of key words, Personal Profile, Education, Work Experience/Employment, Extra-curricular activities etc. and also the structure so that you prioritise the most relevant information.
- **Achievements**
 - Employers are really interested in your achievements, they can be an indicator of your potential and also a way for you to stand out from other applicants.
- **Photos**
 - Including a photo is not a common practice in the UK and you are advised to consider very carefully whether to include one or not. Be judged on your ability and talent or what you look like?
- **Contact details**
 - Employers often use your address to judge your ability to commute to work or whether you would require a relocation.
 - You can include your full contact details (postal address, email and telephone), partial contact details (postcode or city/town, email and telephone) or just your email and telephone number.
 - If you think you would have a long commute to work or would need to relocate it could be a good idea to indicate your willingness to do this in your personal profile or covering letter.
- **References**
 - Employers generally are happy with “available upon request” rather than full reference details.



6. Conclusion

Many of the findings of this study confirmed what the researchers believed to be generally agreed upon by employers regarding student and graduate CVs. These findings include views on the length of CV (two sides preferred) and the issue of photos (that these should not be included). In addition, the consensus relating to extra-curricular activities (that these should be included and can really help an individual to stand out) was anticipated; this concurs with Cole et al. (2007), who found that extra-curricular activities were positively related to employability when employers were making judgements on resumes.

One surprising finding was that more employers indicated they would prefer a CV written in the first person rather than the third person. In the past, the researchers have generally advised students to write in the third person, as this gives the CV a professional feel; this is something they are now re-viewing as a result of this study. Another aspect of the findings which was unexpected was that nearly three-quarters of those interviewed indicated that they would like to see a personal profile on a graduate CV. This perhaps is in agreement with a study by Thoms, et al. (1999), who found that candidates who included accomplishment statements and specific objective statements on their resumes were more likely to obtain an interview.

Several key themes emerged from this study. One which was mentioned by a number of the participants related to the idea of the CV being used to get a sense of the applicant: their personality and whether they will 'fit' into the culture of the organisation. The resulting impression of the applicant and their characteristics could be positive or negative and at least two participants noted that these first impressions may be incorrect or incomplete. Burns (2014) reported similar findings: that recruiters perceive a high level of connection between the content and style of a resume and the candidate's personality; indeed, they also note that this influences the hiring judgement.

Another notable theme was the concept of key words and related to this, 'killer criteria'. Several interviewees described how they will accept or reject within seconds based on the inclusion of certain words or phrases. Perhaps related to this, a third emerging theme was that of time: many of the recruiters mentioned that they have little time to read CVs and will discard them quickly if relevant information is difficult to find. This is an important finding to pass on to students and graduates: that they need to be mindful of this when considering the layout and length of their CV, in addition to content.

A final theme was that of the judgements made by employers when reading CVs, particularly in relation to candidate contact details and photos. It was notable that several employers described how they made judgements on candidate suitability for a role based on the address used on their CV. This has implications for the advice which should be given to students and graduates about what they should include in terms of their personal and contact details. The findings indicate that those applying for jobs located at a distance from their home address would be wise to acknowledge in their application a willingness to commute or relocate. Whilst several interviewees stated that they did not expect to see photos on CVs and were concerned that the inclusion of photos could lead to positive or negative discrimination (and indeed, felt uncomfortable being provided with this information), it was clear that at least one interviewee did use photos as a way of forming impressions about the character of an applicant and how suited they would be to the job. This is in line with Watkins (2000), who found that discrimination based on physical appearance (from photos on resumes) does exist in the selection process.

The researchers have greatly enjoyed the opportunity provided by this project to explore the views held by employers relating to graduate CVs and to obtain insights into the recruiter decision-making process. It is clear however that further research could be done: for example, the views of employers in specific sectors could be explored or a specific study examining covering letters could be conducted. The fact that there were only a few surprises in the findings of this study indicates that the researchers, who belong to a wider community of practice of careers professionals, have access to up-to-date, relevant information about the requirements of graduate recruiters. The findings of this study provide evidence which substantiates this knowledge and expertise. This research project has culminated in the production of the CV rubric and associated guidelines. It is hoped that this evidence-based tool will be of great use to careers practitioners as they seek to support students and graduates, as well as to provide a mechanism for these potential applicants to create and improve their own CVs.

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8. Appendix

What makes a CV effective? Participant Semi Structured Interview	Ben Simkins & Keren Coney <u>HECSU project</u>
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Indicative questions:

1. Could you please describe your own experience of using CVs to recruit students and graduates (Is this something done frequently? Occasionally? Hardly ever?)
2. In your opinion, what role do CVs play in your recruitment process? (e.g. first round of the recruitment process? As an accompaniment to application form?)
3. Refer to Shortlist/Rejection grid
 - a. CVs in the first or third person?
 - b. References or "Available upon request"?
 - c. Personal profile?
 - d. Length of CV; always 2 sides?
 - e. Full address?
 - f. What makes a CV stand out from the crowd for you?
 - g. Testimonials? i.e. mini written reference
4. If you had to add a weighting (in terms of relative importance) how would you split 100% between a) Appropriate presentation and structure, b) Linguistic quality and accuracy, and c) Content?
5. Any other comments?

	Shortlist	Reject
Appropriate Presentation And Structure		
Linguistic quality and accuracy		
Content		