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THE CAMPUS CONNECTION
Student engagement update June 2022



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All indicators suggest that this year's graduate recruitment season has been unlike any other in recent memory. Employers of all sizes, across all industries, have been reporting extremely low application rates in comparison to previous years.

As an employer, it can be frustrating and disheartening when you have great opportunities you believe students should be receptive to, but you aren't receiving applications. However, it is really important to understand the unique set of factors impacting this unprecedented period for our job market and to stay optimistic.

NZUni Talent and its network of industry engagement specialists across all eight New Zealand Universities have come together, using insights into their students, to provide context and reassurance.

What's caused the drop in applications this year?

In a word, COVID 19.

- ❖ Isolation requirements and the health, wellbeing and financial impacts of the last few months have hit students extremely hard. Many have been simply "getting by" day to day and focusing purely on their studies, staying healthy and not much else. It has been hard to have a long-term view to the end of their studies, job applications and beyond. The impacts of COVID have also been experienced differently in each region and at different times. ***"Employers may have engaged with two or more universities across the country and found engagement levels to be quite different. It is important to remember these universities and communities could be at quite different stages in the infection cycle."*** - Robyn Cummins, University of Canterbury.
- ❖ Word of mouth for events and job opportunities has suffered as socialising hasn't been at the same level it normally would be around campuses up and down the country. ***"Usually, students discuss employer events they are attending or opportunities they are considering with their friends and classmates. That word of mouth is a real driver of engagement which we haven't seen this year due to isolation and things being online"*** - Michael Parkes, Victoria University of Wellington.
- ❖ For many students, economic speculation has created the perception that the job market is not that good when in fact the opposite is true. ***"There is, surprisingly, a bit of disconnect between their fears and what is actually happening. Many of our students think that employers won't want grads in a COVID marketplace – but this simply isn't true."*** - Kate Coley, the University of Auckland.
- ❖ The "Great Resignation" has created disruption in the job market, as people look for change in light of the pandemic. This, alongside our already low unemployment rate, has created talent deficits and skills gaps at all levels and in most sectors within our job market. The early talent sector has not been cushioned from this and is just as candidate short with demand not being met by supply.
- ❖ The process of searching through larger volumes of jobs has become more complex, but also increasingly confusing for students. Many employers are now less specific in what they require, focusing more on soft skills rather than areas of study. This can mean opportunities often aren't resonating with applicants or they aren't applying thinking they aren't an ideal candidate.
- ❖ With the surge in Omicron cases hitting right in the middle of graduate recruitment season most face-to-face events were cancelled or moved online. Whilst engagement at virtual events was still on the whole really good, it didn't allow for the same level of networking and one on one interaction to occur which we know is a key factor in ensuring high quality, relevant applications ***"There's no question that many employers, and students, prefer to network with one another at in-person events. Coupled with this, many online events have followed on from days of online teaching for many students. 'Zoom Fatigue' is real for many people"*** - John Ross, Massey Career Centre.

- ❖ Since 2020, the flow of international students into New Zealand has completely stopped. This has had a very obvious impact on application levels as international students usually account for a considerable proportion of applications.
- ❖ New Zealand's borders have now re-opened, and it's estimated we could see tens of thousands of people leaving the country over the next year. This will include a percentage of recent graduates who will be exploring overseas work opportunities or just taking an O.E. they pushed back due to the pandemic. Those planning to go overseas to travel will be delaying applications until next year or pressing pause on the process altogether.

What advice can we offer employers?

The good news is that most of the factors mentioned above are expected to be temporary. It has definitely been "the perfect storm" with many factors compounding at the same time to put pressure on the market. Here are a few points to think about as we look forward to the second half of 2022.

- ❖ Review your expectations and be realistic about the outcomes you are hoping for. These are unique times; outcomes will not be as they have usually been. It's a new era in attraction and recruitment with more competition and more urgency but the key is getting good quality, relevant applications not necessarily volume.
- ❖ Review your offering against competitors- pay, flexibility/hybrid working, advancement opportunities, your organisation's culture etc. are all being scrutinised and compared so it is so important to ensure your entire offering is attractive to your target audience.
- ❖ Make sure it is clearly communicated what you are looking for and who your ideal candidates are, in your listings and all interactions with potential candidates. Make sure your message is consistent and as unambiguous as possible.
- ❖ Keep advertising, engaging with students and looking for ways to build your brand and tell your story. Let students know they are very much in demand and that you are hiring! Get onto campus if you can or host an online event. ***"Advertising should actually be the very last step in your attraction process. It begins with engaging with students on campus, constantly being visible and finding ways to build your brand throughout the year not just when you are about to recruit"- Michelle Ash, Lincoln University.***
- ❖ The borders have re-opened and over the rest of 2022 and beyond we will see international students return to New Zealand universities. These International students are eligible for a post study work visa on completion of their tertiary qualification in New Zealand which will make them a valuable addition to the talent pool.
- ❖ Look at the best times to go to market for students and perhaps consider multiple campaigns this year. Advertising immediate start roles for example will have greater success at certain times of the year (coming up to graduation) and other times of the year such as exam or assignment periods tend to be a "no go." ***"Thinking outside of the box about the timing of your recruitment is key, so many employers go to market early in the academic year which is such a busy time for students academically and socially. If you are able to hold back your campaign until later in the year you may find students are more receptive and there is less competition from other organisations."- Danielle Wakefield the University of Waikato***

It looks as though campus life will return to normal in the second half of the year. Universities are already welcoming employers back on campus for presentations, networking events and expos. Each University will have details of what's coming up and their [employer engagement teams](#) are your best points of contact to discuss your campaign and what they can do to help drive engagement.