

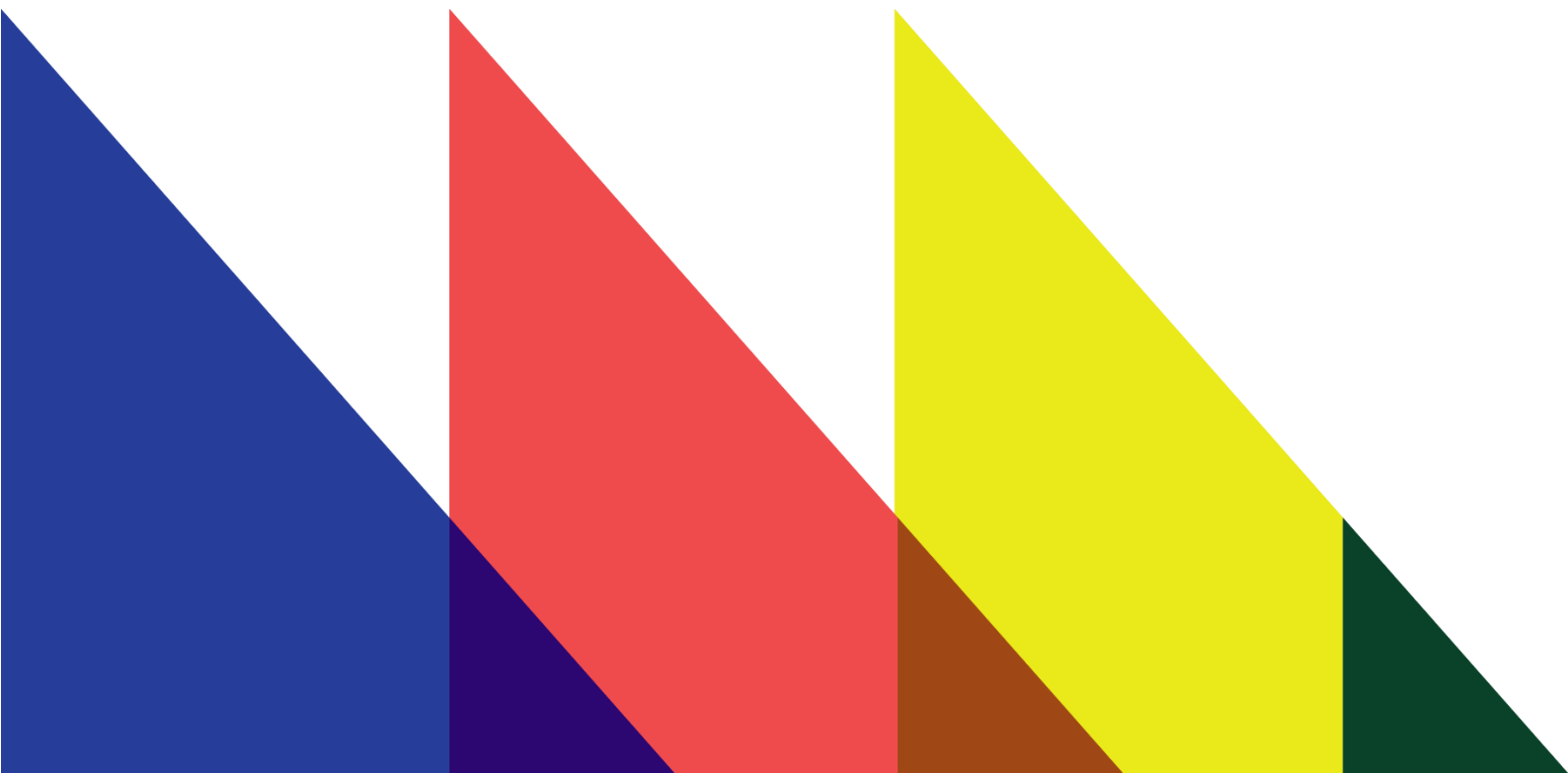


European Network on International Student Mobility  
**Connecting Research and Practice**

**Employers' Perspectives on the Value of  
International Study Experience**

**ENIS Policy Brief 02/2024**

27 August 2024



## 1. Snapshot overview

Study abroad experiences enhance skills such as adaptability, cross-cultural communication, and foreign language proficiency (1). Because of this, study abroad experience is often expected to be valued by employers. Nevertheless, scientific evidence on the value that employers attribute to international study experiences remains rather restricted, with mixed findings across countries. This policy brief synthesizes the global literature to explore how country context, employer type, candidate skills, and graduate nationality impact employers' perceptions of study abroad experiences.

## 2. Background

Employers' perspectives on international study experience require greater attention from policymakers, higher education institutions (HEIs), and international students entering the labour market. Although numerous studies link higher education to employability and describe employers' views on employability, there is a need for more focused research on how employers perceive candidates with study abroad experiences, particularly as study abroad is often promoted as being valued by employers.

Despite the documented advantages of studying abroad for students, employers do not always seem to perceive such experiences positively. While international offices highlight the benefits of studying abroad, empirical evidence suggests that these experiences do not consistently translate into improved employment prospects (2, 4), especially for securing initial job opportunities (2, 3).

Employers' perspectives on study abroad experiences are multifaceted and influenced by various factors. For example, some employers may prioritize candidates with strong intercultural communication skills, while others may value language proficiency or leadership abilities more highly. Furthermore, the importance placed on these experiences could also vary between native and foreign student groups.

This policy brief examines the global academic literature on employers' recruitment preferences for candidates with study abroad experiences, whether they return home, remain in the host country, or move to a third country. By bringing together existing studies, we illustrate how country context, employer type, candidate skill set, and graduate nationality all significantly influence employers' perceptions of the value of international study experiences.

## 3. Key findings

### 3.1 National Labour Market Context Makes a Difference

The national contexts within which employers are seeking out candidates appears to matter for the employability of students with international study experience (3). For example, it has been demonstrated that there is significant international variety in terms of the importance assigned to international study and internship experiences during recruitment (2). However, overall, only a minority of employers seem to consider international study experience when making recruitment decisions (2). A recent study shows that even if graduates indicate the skills gained through a study abroad experience in their motivation letter, studying abroad does not increase the likelihood of getting invited to a job interview for entry-level jobs in Belgium, the Netherlands

and Spain (3). There are also positive research findings, such as a study finding that Portuguese employers attribute great value to the Erasmus+ programme as a tool to prepare undergraduates for future jobs abroad and international work assignments (4).

### **3.2 Competences Sought by the Employers Make a Difference**

Both employees and employers, in most cases, are interested in acquiring / recruiting skills and qualifications that are of paramount importance in the job market (6), such as good interpersonal skills, strategic/organisational skills, international orientation, and well-developed general academic skills (7). Amongst them, international orientation, which can be gained through study abroad for example, is not sufficient in itself to become hired (7). That is to say, international orientation can have a positive influence if combined with other skills and credentials (7). Furthermore, it also seems that temporary study abroad experiences are more valuable to employers compared to studying an entire degree abroad (7, 5).

Studying at a partner institution in a non-English speaking country, such as France, has been found to be highly beneficial for students returning to the UK. This evidence suggests that employers place significant value on the improvement of graduates' foreign language skills gained through study abroad, rather than solely on their intercultural skills (8). In line with this finding, Chinese employers prioritise foreign language skills and knowledge of overseas markets when evaluating study abroad experiences (9). Additional desirable skills include diversity awareness, critical thinking, creativity, and curiosity (9). Generally, Chinese employers have a favourable view of UK education, despite potential mismatches between acquired skills and employer expectations (9).

A study from the U.S. highlights that both employees and employers value qualifications crucial in international labour markets, such as international professional certificates, previous work experience, specialisation in various computer programs, and a high GPA (6). However, employers also seek soft skills as a crucial requirement of employability. The latter reflects the need for "transnational, interpersonal, and transferable skills" in globalised labour markets (10).

International student mobility fosters the development of transferable competencies such as adaptability, flexibility, autonomy, enthusiasm, drive, foreign language proficiency, intercultural competence, self-motivation, and tolerance to change and uncertainty (10). However, not all employers may prioritize these skills when recruiting, which can explain the international variability in hiring decisions.

### **3.3 The Type of Employer Makes a Difference**

Some sectors and companies value foreign experience more than others (12). Not all employers have a global vision and scope for the role of international students in the labour market. A UK study on small-medium enterprises (SMEs) confirms that challenges in attracting international students to SMEs include students' preference for larger corporations, a lack of understanding of immigration and visa regulations (by employers and international students), concerns about students' English communication skills (by SMEs), and communication gaps between employers and universities (13). Employers' perspectives are diverse according to the country context: some are more interested in language skills and information on the global labour markets, while some are seeking interpersonal skills and knowledge of the local labour market. In short, if the employers are SMEs, they tend to seek information on local labour markets and networks; if they are multinational or national with an international outlook, they tend to seek more internationalised minds and language skills (11, 13, 17).

### 3.4 The National Context of the Graduate Makes a Difference

While there is a general assumption that international graduates returning to their home countries will have better employment prospects (14), a number of studies have shown that this might not necessarily be the case, depending on different factors. Employers and potential employees assess the educational market value of studies abroad differently. Accordingly, the symbolic capital of an HEI mediates between student and employer, as discussed in the international student mobility literature (18, 19). In line with this, a Chinese study indicated that returning Chinese graduates are more valued, despite the fact that the employers find the returnees' salary expectations unrealistic (14). They might also consider them lacking the necessary social/professional networks (20) that are absolutely crucial for them to find jobs as they return with study abroad degrees (14, 19, 20). The example of Latvia indicates that successful integration into the labour market is difficult due to complications with foreign countries' recognition of acquired education by Latvians. In addition, not all Latvian employers recognize and are aware of the importance of the experience gained in foreign higher education systems (16).

## 4. Recommendations

### 01 | For governments and policymakers

**Policymakers need to support raising awareness among employers, to appreciate study abroad as a way to gain skills desired by the labour market**

Policymakers can enhance the recognition of study abroad experiences in the job market by emphasizing personal and professional outcomes through targeted regional awareness campaigns. These communication initiatives, informed by empirical research demonstrating international variability, should highlight sectors and companies valuing skills gained through international experiences. Encouraging collaborative initiatives between universities and businesses including SMEs, promoting diversity and inclusion policies, and addressing bias among employers, is crucial. While grants for skills development, and cultural integration partnerships can incentivize collaboration, effective communication campaigns are needed to boost their appeal.

### 02 | For higher education institutions

**It is crucial to align the international experiences of students with skills desired by employers**

We recommend HEIs to view employability within an ecosystem and to have a multifaceted strategy for the employability skills of their students. Within this ecosystem, HEIs should be more aware of the criteria sought in that particular labour market. Therefore, they need to make sure their students acquire skills employers are seeking. In terms of fostering international skills, recommendations include implementing intercultural competence (cross-cultural understanding, cross-cultural communication skills) programmes, involving both employers and students, tailoring initiatives to international students' needs, integrating workplace cultural competence, enhancing language support, and strengthening links between academic programs and employer expectations.

### **HEIs can address challenges to employability via collaboration with employers, career centres, and targeted internships**

Pedagogical adaptations in degree programs for workplace internationalization, collaboration with employers and career centres, and internships can address existing challenges. HEIs can inform employers better about the benefits of study abroad, taking into account the variety of workplace cultures and employer types. Establishing formal channels with small businesses, promoting the value of hiring international students, providing information on employment rights and visas, and regional outreach are crucial.

### **Enhance the orientation process to better inform students who want to study abroad about job expectations and the study abroad experience**

Specialised support for students when they choose their destination abroad for their studies is indispensable. An analysis of the national and the international labour market can benefit students in making more informed choices. Raising consciousness amongst students, therefore, would also affect their professional careers in the future. The analysis of the programme that they are going to study and if this programme includes professional internships (or not) should also be a part of the orientation process.

### **Researchers can focus on comparative analysis of multiple countries**

Comprehensive analyses that incorporate diverse controls in multiple countries with different cultures of HEIs are essential to understand how different factors interact to shape employers' perceptions of study abroad experiences (21). This will help inform policies aimed at enhancing the employability of international students.

## **5. References**

- 1| Ogden, A., Streitwieser, B. and Van Mol, C. (eds., 2021) Education Abroad. Bridging Scholarship and Practice. Oxon & New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429431463>
- 2| Van Mol, C., (2017). Do employers value international study and internships? A comparative analysis of 31 countries. *Geoforum*, 78, pp.52-60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.11.014>
- 3| Van Mol, C., Ozaist, M., Perez-Encinas, A., and P. DiMarzo (2023) Does study abroad pay off during recruitment? Evidence from a field experiment from Belgium, the Netherlands and Spain. [www.erasmuscareers.org](http://www.erasmuscareers.org)
- 4| Barbosa, I., & Freire, C. (2019). Portuguese employers' perceptions on management undergraduates' transferable competencies. *Journal of management development*, 38(2), 141-156. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-07-2017-0244>
- 5| Wiers-Jenssen, J., & Try, S. (2005). Labour market outcomes of higher education undertaken abroad. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 681-705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500340028>
- 6| Murrar, A., Batra, M., Paz, V., Asfour, B. & Balmakhtar, M. (2022). Employability of job applicants in skilful jobs: commonality in employer and employee perspectives. *International journal of manpower*, 43(6), 1285—1300. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJM-10-2020-0454>
- 7| Humburg, M., Van der Velden, R. & Verhagen, A. (2013). *The employability of higher education graduates*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/54258>
- 8| Byrne, C. (2022). What determines perceived graduate employability? Exploring the effects of personal characteristics, academic achievements and graduate skills in a survey experiment. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(1), 159-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1735329>

- 9| Zhao, X., & Cox, A. (2022). Chinese students' study in the UK and employability: the views of Chinese employers, students and alumni, and UK teachers. *Journal of Education and Work*, 35(4), 422-440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2022.2073339>
- 10 | Ripmeester, N. (2016). Internationalisation and employability: Making the connection between degree and the world of work. In Global and local internationalization. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen & H. de Wit (Eds.), *Global and Local Internationalization* (pp. 121-127). Brill Education. ISBN: 978-94-6300-301-8 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-301-8>
- 11| Misati, E., Walumbwa, F. O., Lahiri, S., & Kundu, S. K. (2017). The internationalization of African small and medium enterprises (SMEs): a South-North pattern. *Africa Journal of Management*, 3(1), 53-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322373.2016.1275940>
- 12| Kratz, F. & Netz, N. (2018). Which mechanisms explain monetary returns to international student mobility? *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(2), 375-400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1172307>
- 13| Sutherland, M., Thompson, D. & Edirisingha, P. (2021). Try before you buy: a small business employer (SME) perspective of international student mobility in England. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(7), 1256-1271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1680965>
- 14| Cai, Y. (2013). Graduate employability: A conceptual framework for understanding employers' perceptions. *Higher education*, 65, 457-469. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9556-x>
- 15| Garam, I. (2005) Study on the Relevance of International Student Mobility to Work and Employment. Helsinki: Centre for International Mobility (CIMO). Retrieved from <https://www.oph.fi/en>
- 16| Mierina, I., Buzinska, L. & Jansone, R. (2017). Latvian labor market information provision for the diaspora/ Latvijas darba tirgus informācijas nodrošinājums diasporai. Center for Diaspora and Migration Studies of the University of Latvia, Riga, Latvia, pp.97. Retrieved from [https://www.diaspora.lu.lv/fileadmin/user\\_upload/lu\\_portal/projekti/diaspora/petijumi/Zinojum\\_s.pdf](https://www.diaspora.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/projekti/diaspora/petijumi/Zinojum_s.pdf)
- 17| Guimarães, L. G. D. A., Blanchet, P., & Cimon, Y. (2021). Collaboration among small and medium-sized enterprises as part of internationalization: a systematic review. *Administrative Sciences*, 11(4), 153. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11040153>
- 18| Brooks, R., & Waters, J. (2009). A second chance at 'success' UK students and global circuits of higher education. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1085-1102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240909105204>
- 19| Findlay, A. M., King, R., Smith, F. M., Geddes, A., & Skeldon, R. (2012). World class? An investigation of globalisation, difference and international student mobility. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37(1), 118-131. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41427932>
- 20| Gu, M., Michael, R., Zheng, C., & Trines, S. (2019). Education in China. *World Education News+ Reviews*. WENR World Education News + Reviews, 1-57. Retrieved from <https://wenr.wes.org/2019/12/education-in-china-3>
- 21| Jacob, M., Kühhirt, M., & Rodrigues, M. (2019). Labour market returns to graduates' international experience: Exploring cross-country variation in Europe. *European Sociological Review*, 35(4), 491-505. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcz022>

## 6. Authors' information

### Şahizer Samuk

BI Norwegian Business School, Norway  
Member of WG2, Stakeholder advisor of WG4  
[sahizer.samuk@imtlucca.it](mailto:sahizer.samuk@imtlucca.it)

**Fatos Ozkan Erciyas**

University of Birmingham, the UK  
WG4 Member  
[f.ozkanerciyas@bham.ac.uk](mailto:f.ozkanerciyas@bham.ac.uk)

**Christof Van Mol**

Tilburg University, the Netherlands  
ENIS Chair  
[c.vanmol@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:c.vanmol@tilburguniversity.edu)

**Jannecke Wiers-Jenssen**

Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), Norway  
Leader of WG4  
[jannecke.wiers-jenssen@nifu.no](mailto:jannecke.wiers-jenssen@nifu.no)

**Paweł Bryła**

University of Lodz, Poland  
Member of WG1 and WG4  
[pawel.bryla@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:pawel.bryla@uni.lodz.pl)

**Lamia Ben Hamid**

HEG - Haute école de gestion Arc, Switzerland  
WG4 member  
[lamia.benhamida@he-arc.ch](mailto:lamia.benhamida@he-arc.ch)

**Robert G. Valls-Figuera**

Universitat de Barcelona, Spain  
Member of WG3 and WG4  
[rgvalls@ub.edu](mailto:rgvalls@ub.edu)

**Liva Grinevica**

Latvian Council of Science & Latvian Academy of Agricultural and Forestry Sciences, Latvia  
Member of WG4  
[liva.grinevica@gmail.com](mailto:liva.grinevica@gmail.com)

**John Cullinan**

University of Galway, Ireland  
Co-leader of WG4, member of WG2  
[john.cullinan@universityofgalway.ie](mailto:john.cullinan@universityofgalway.ie)

To cite this policy brief:

Samuk, S., Ozkan Erciyas, F., Van Mol, C., Wiers-Jenssen, J., Bryla, P., Ben Hamid, L., Valls-Figuera, R.G., Grinevica, L. & Cullinan, J. (2024). Employers' Perspectives on the Value of International Study Experience (ENIS Policy Brief 02/2024). DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.28134.84808](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.28134.84808)







European Network on International Student Mobility  
Connecting Research and Practice

[www.enisnetwork.com](http://www.enisnetwork.com)



Follow us:

 @enisnetwork

 <https://bit.ly/3c8djwV>

 <https://bit.ly/3ANmfCi>

This policy brief was produced by  
**WG4 | ENIS Network**

