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LEARNING ABROAD AND EMPLOYABILITY: RESEARCHING THE CONNECTIONS

DR DAVINA POTTS

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The connection between learning abroad and employability has been gaining ground in recent years. Since the publication of IEAA's first research digest on learning abroad outcomes (Potts & Berquist, 2014) – including career outcomes and long-term impact – there has been an increasing focus on how overseas study experiences can influence career and employment outcomes. As the theme of numerous forums and conferences, the subject has also become one of the most highly-discussed topics at international education events (such as the IEAA Mobility Forum 2017, the Global Internship Conference and the Career Integration Conference).

So how did we get here and why are we so concerned with connecting learning abroad and employability? It is not a new concept. Since the first ERASMUS impact studies (Teichler & Maiworm, 1997; Jahr & Teichler, 2000; Bracht, et. al., 2006), researchers have been examining the career-related outcomes of participants in ERASMUS exchange programs. Originally designed to support the development of international skills and the European identity, the program also encourages the mobility of talent across borders. Subsequent evaluations of the policy and program have, therefore, focused on these priorities. Even before ERASMUS, the Study Abroad Evaluation Project (SAEP) examined alongside other themes, professional outcomes of students from five countries in learning abroad programs in the 1980s (Carlson, J. S., Burn, B. B., Useem, J., & Yackimowicz, D. (1990); Opper, Teichler & Carlson, 1990).

Today, many education systems frame higher education as an instrument of labour market development. Co-curricular and extra-curricular activities such as learning abroad are often promoted as value-added undertakings which further enhance human capital development.

In the US, learning abroad is identified as a high impact experience through the National Survey on Student Engagement which has now been running for almost two decades (see Kuh, 2008). Learning abroad can be a high cost activity and as such, may be viewed as an investment that will generate future benefits. These benefits can include intrapersonal and interpersonal development, career direction, an expanded world view, international networks and advantages in the employment market. As a result, research on learning abroad outcomes has shifted to focus on building evidence to support investment in learning abroad by governments, institutions and individuals.

This research digest presents the findings of 10 studies published since 2014, which contribute to our understanding of the link between learning abroad and employability. Drawn from a global search, these studies present the perspective of the graduate (although some also include employer perspectives) after graduation. Most of the studies can be classified as short to medium-term, meaning that the results are measured within 10 years of graduation. A few studies provide a longer-term perspective. For the purpose of creating a meaningful and useful summary, the studies in this paper have been curated to provide a broad range of insights from the literature.

IEAA would like to thank Brett Berquist (The University of Auckland) and Martha Johnson (The University of Minnesota) for their contribution in reviewing this research digest.

Measuring employability through learning abroad

Although graduate employment rates are often used as a proxy for employability, they are not a full measure of graduate employability. Rather, graduate employment rates are a snapshot in time which may (or may not) account for the transition from study to employment. This could include temporary work placements, unpaid internships, casual employment, travel and other personal obligations that mean participants are not available for work (such as family care responsibilities). Internationally, graduate employment is subject to local employment market factors and temporal influences, which may require further analysis and interpretation.

Research into employability through learning abroad will often take a human, social and cultural capital perspective. This perspective frames positive outcomes in terms of growth – the experience of living and learning in another country leads to development and growth of the individual across the personal, economic, social and cultural domains. Investment in the development of various forms of capital leads to a return on that investment, although some forms of return are easier to measure than others (see McMahon & Oketch, 2013 and McMahon, 2009 for further discussion on the private and social benefits of education). Common measures discussed in the literature presented in this paper include skills development, career progression, salary, international professional mobility, leadership, type of work position obtained and job and life satisfaction.

DEFINITIONS

EMPLOYABILITY

Employability can be defined as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke, 2004).

It is important to note the distinctions between employability and employment. Firstly, employability is a long-term concept that supports a person through job changes and career developments. Employability is not solely demonstrated through the attainment of a job after graduation. Secondly, employability is developmental in that it builds through experiences. Finally, the benefit of graduate employability extends beyond the individual to the organisation, the community and the economy.

LEARNING ABROAD

Learning abroad is otherwise referred to as outbound mobility, international study experience, education abroad, study abroad and credit mobility. The Forum on Education Abroad refers to education abroad as “education that occurs outside the participant's home country. Besides study abroad, examples include such international experiences as work, volunteering, non-credit internships, and directed travel, as long as these programs are driven to a significant degree by learning goals” (Forum on Education Abroad, 2017).

For the purpose of this paper, Learning Abroad is defined as an educational experience that may include study, work, volunteering, professional placements, research or competitions, undertaken in another country for recognition towards their degree or study program.

01 Europe ERASMUS Impact Study

Brandenburg, et. al. (2014)

The European Commission has a long history of commissioning impact studies to assess the effectiveness of achieving the policy objectives of the ERASMUS program, which are primarily to boost skills and employability, and to modernise education, training and youth work (European Commission, 2016). In the period 2014–2020, the program aims to support two million youth to study and work abroad. This report is the latest evaluation study on the impact of the ERASMUS program and perhaps the most often cited as evidence of the link between learning abroad and employability.

The study is complex, with a sample size of around 40,000 mobile students, 4,000 non-mobile students and 14,000 alumni. Learning abroad experiences encompass semester and year-long ERASMUS programs, work placements, intensive programs and other types of mobility including programs outside of Europe (including non-ERASMUS programs). Overall, the sample represents 964 institutions from 25 countries and includes responses from more than 600 employers (see the full report for detailed findings).

European employers appear to have become more knowledgeable about learning abroad and the characteristics of learning abroad programs over time.

Although there are notable differences between the mobile and non-mobile samples, the statistics should be read carefully. For example, the report states that the unemployment rate for mobile students is 23 per cent lower than for non-mobile students five years after graduation.

This translates as 7 per cent unemployment verses 9 per cent unemployment, and the report does not confirm if this result is statistically significant.

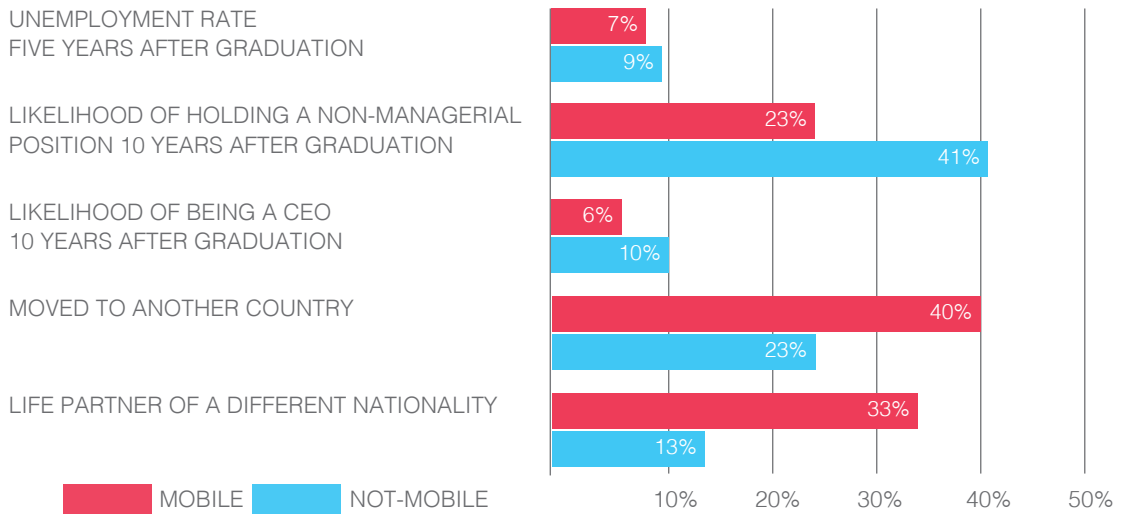
Other results include a higher propensity (of learning abroad participants) to move to another country. Non-mobile graduates were more likely to hold a non-managerial position 10 years after graduation. In contrast, non-mobile participants were more likely to be a CEO than their mobile peers, requiring nuanced interpretation of the results reported.

In terms of skills development, ERASMUS exchange students reported the top five skills improved through learning abroad were:

1. Foreign language skills (96%)
2. Knowledge of the host country's culture, society and economy (96%)
3. Being able to work and interact with people from other backgrounds and cultures (94%)
4. Intercultural competence (94%)
5. To adapt and act in new situations (94%).

This study was conducted during the economic crisis in Europe, so the impact of youth unemployment rates should be considered in the interpretation of the results. From the qualitative component of the study, student participants believed that learning abroad gave them a competitive advantage in a difficult employment market. European employers appear to have become more knowledgeable about learning abroad and the characteristics of learning abroad programs over time. For example, in the previous ERASMUS study, less than 40 per cent of employers indicated that the reputation of the institution abroad was important. In the current study, almost 80 per cent of employers rated this aspect as important.

TABLE 1 SELECT RESULTS FROM THE ERASMUS IMPACT STUDY



02 United States

Gaining an employment edge: the impact of study abroad on 21st century skills and career prospects in the US

Farrugia & Sanger (2017)

As part of the Generation Study Abroad campaign in the US, the Institute of International Education (IIE) conducted a study of skills development and career outcomes as perceived by former learning abroad participants. The study surveyed 4,564 respondents who had participated in learning abroad and graduated over the 18 year period from 1999–2017. Thirty interviews were also conducted.

Although the sample represents several generations of university graduates, more than half of survey respondents were relatively recent graduates with five years or less work experience, and an annual income of \$50,000 or less; 53 per cent worked in the public sector. The report was skewed towards mid-to-long-term learning abroad experiences, with 62 per cent of respondents having undertaken an experience of at least one semester in duration, contrary to the current trend in US study abroad favouring short-term programs (Institute of International Education, 2017).

The majority of respondents reported that their study abroad experience helped develop or improve key transferable skills – intercultural skills, curiosity, flexibility and adaptability, confidence, and self-awareness to a significant degree. About half of respondents felt that study abroad helped increase their interpersonal skills, communication, problem solving, language skills, tolerance for ambiguity, and course or major-related knowledge to a significant degree.

Thirty participants were interviewed for the study. Although almost 80 per cent indicated that they discussed learning abroad in job interviews, the overseas study experience was typically not raised by the employer. As job candidates, study abroad alumni were most likely to include reflections from their learning abroad experience when answering behavioural questions. The study reports that more than half of respondents agreed that their learning abroad experience contributed to a job offer at some point in their employment history.

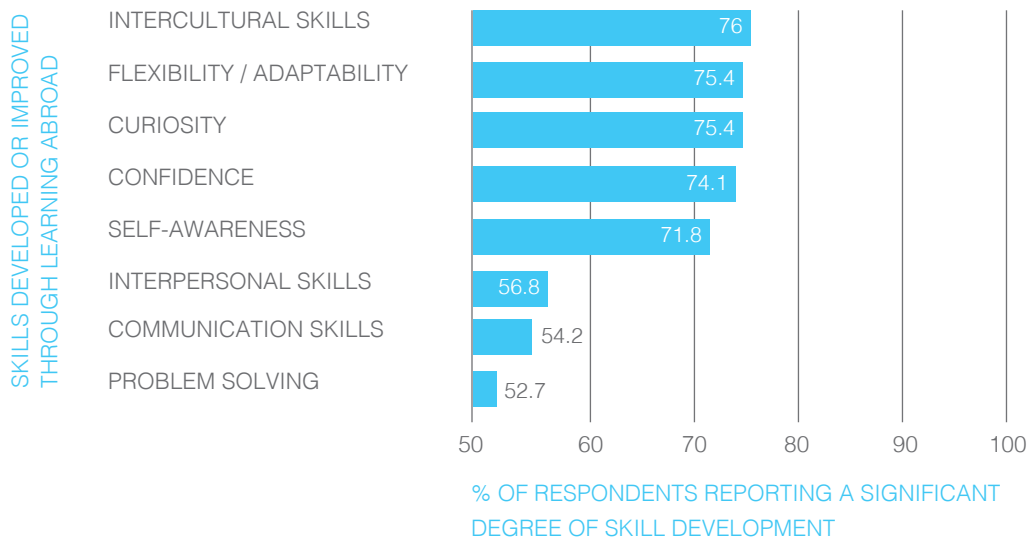
More than half of respondents agreed that their learning abroad experience contributed to a job offer at some point in their employment history.

When asked about using skills developed on the job, participants reported higher use of general skills and awareness (such as working with people from different backgrounds) than specific skills and knowledge (such as places and cultures). Learning abroad was also associated with the development of career confidence and direction, even when career development was not the goal of the learning abroad experience.

This study was able to make some assessment of the impact of program duration on employability outcomes. Longer programs had a statistically significant, positive impact on the development of 11 (of 15) employability skills tested (including language skills, communication skills, adaptability and flexibility, self-awareness). However, curiosity, leadership and work ethic were unaffected by duration.

The findings for teamwork were reversed, with participants of short-term programs more likely to report a significant impact on skills development in this area. In summary, Farrugia and Sanger state “these findings suggest that different types of study abroad programs lead to different employability outcomes and should therefore be offered and undertaken in a deliberate manner to align with the student’s intended employment outcomes” (p.16).

TABLE 2 SELECT RESULTS FROM U.S. PARTICIPANTS IN LEARNING ABROAD PROGRAMS



03 Japan Survey of global personal development and long-term impact of study abroad

Yokota et. al. (2016)

In 2015, the Japanese Research Consortium for the Sustainable Promotion of International Education (RECSIE) initiated a large-scale tracer study of the long-term impact of study abroad. The study looked at all types of educational exchange, including learning abroad, language school abroad, undergraduate, masters and doctoral degrees abroad. Based on the 2009 US research project Study Abroad for Global Engagement (SAGE), the study considers the impact of learning abroad beyond careers and into their community engagement and life satisfaction.

Overall, the study gathered data from 4,489 overseas study participants and 1,298 non-participants (graduates of a Japanese university degree with no overseas study component). At the time of the study, the sample was aged between 22 and 59, and they went abroad between 1983 and 2012. The study covered topics from skills and abilities, values and behaviours, to subsequent employment and life satisfaction.

The data in the final report is extensive, and for the purpose of comparison with other studies in this paper, this review will report on male respondents who participated in for-credit learning abroad experiences as part of their Japanese degree (n=381), compared with those who did not participate in learning abroad (n=334) (see original report for a full data set and other comparison groups). The published report does not include information on whether statistical testing has been undertaken and therefore whether the differences reported hold statistical significance.

Firstly, learning abroad participants reported higher levels of improvement on fundamental workplace abilities than their peers. Communicative ability (87 per cent compared with 45 per cent) received the highest level of agreement. Resilience to stress was rated almost double in terms of improvement for learning abroad participants compared with non-participants. Full results are displayed in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Fundamental workplace abilities improved as a result of a study abroad / Japanese university experience.

	UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE	
	STUDIED ABROAD (STRONGLY AGREE, TEND TO AGREE, %)	DID NOT STUDY ABROAD (STRONGLY AGREE, TEND TO AGREE, %)
Communicative ability	87.6	45.5
Leadership	54.6	26.7
Positive attitude / ability to take action	81.9	42.8
Resilience to stress	76.6	35.6
Flexibility	82.4	49.1
Perseverance	77.1	43.4

For the Japanese higher education sector, which has experienced a decline in interest in international study, the evidence of positive work and life impact can be used to promote learning abroad participation to the current generation of university students.

Turning to the impact of learning abroad on employment, 62 per cent of learning abroad participants agreed or strongly agreed that their international study experience was helpful in obtaining their current job (see Table 4). Although some impact on salary level was reported for almost 45 per cent of learning abroad participants, this aspect of employment impact received the lowest agreement. Seventy per cent of respondents reported that their learning abroad experience was helpful in planning their career, whereas only 36 per cent of those who did not study abroad thought their Japanese university experience was helpful for planning their career.

Job and life satisfaction

Although the data appears to show a difference in satisfaction with their current job and their current salary between participants and non-participants, the authors report that these differences were not significant. The report notes, however, that learning abroad participants report higher satisfaction with life, which they attribute to interaction and friendship with diverse others, along with engagement in social issues.

Those who participated in learning abroad were more likely to be actively engaged in community activities (50 per cent compared with 17 per cent), and actively engaged with people from diverse values and cultures (40 per cent compared with 8 per cent), ages and fields.

As the original US study (see Paige, et. al., 2009) did not include a comparison group of alumni who did not study abroad, the latest Japanese study advances the research on learning abroad outcomes by providing this comparison. For the Japanese higher education sector, which has experienced a decline in interest in international study, the evidence of positive work and life impact can be used to promote learning abroad participation to the current generation of university students.

TABLE 4 To what extent did students consider their study abroad / Japanese university experience influenced their career?

	UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE	
	STUDIED ABROAD (STRONGLY AGREE, TEND TO AGREE, %)	DID NOT STUDY ABROAD (STRONGLY AGREE, TEND TO AGREE, %)
Helpful in planning my career	70.1	35.9
Helpful in gaining my current job	62.4	41.9
Helpful in obtaining a higher current salary	44.9	27.9
I use knowledge and skills gained while studying abroad / at Japanese university in my current job	60.4	29.7

TABLE 5 How satisfied are students with each of the following items?

Are you satisfied with your current job?	64.8	45.5
Are you satisfied with your current income?	48.3	26.7
Are you satisfied with your study abroad / Japanese university experience?	70.9	54.8
Are you satisfied with life?	68.3	50.3

04 **Italy** Do study abroad programs enhance the employability of graduates?

Di Pietro (2015)

In a labour market with high unemployment rates for university graduates, finding ways to improve employability is critical. In Italy in 2007, 12.8 per cent of the population with a university degree was unemployed. Di Pietro's (2015) study examined the impact of learning abroad on employment for graduates (N=33,015) who completed degrees in 2004 and who had been in the workforce for approximately three years.

Using advanced statistical modelling which provides an excellent example for future research, this study determined that learning abroad had a meaningful impact on the probability of being employed three years after graduation in a difficult labour market (while controlling for a range of individual and study variables). However, the results were driven primarily by the impact of learning abroad on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This grouping represented graduates in the second-lowest socio-economic grouping rather than very disadvantaged graduates.

The findings can be interpreted as – learning abroad provides a boost to graduates who may face some difficulty in the labour market, compared to their more advantaged peers. This group is able to access the resources to study abroad (possibly through scholarships) along with the cultural capital and motivation to seek out the opportunity, and these factors may differentiate the group from their very disadvantaged peers. This study provides support to strategies that aim to make learning abroad more accessible to support the employability of some disadvantaged student populations, such as current diversity initiatives in learning abroad in the US like the Gilman Scholarship Program (see page 11).

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05 United States Gilman Evaluation Report

Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs (2016)

The Gilman Scholarship Program provides learning abroad scholarships for US undergraduate students with limited financial means. As a program of the US Department of State, the objectives of the program support foreign policy goals such as increasing US competitiveness and improving understanding of other countries. This mixed-methods study evaluated the long-term outcomes for scholarship recipients between 2003 and 2010 (N = approx. 1590). The majority of respondents in this study participated in learning abroad programs for a semester (73%) or a year (15%). Seventy-nine percent of respondents undertook language study while abroad.

As an outcome of their learning abroad experience, respondents reported greater interest and connection with their host countries and regions. Being part of a global community and feeling better prepared to engage with the world were part of their new perspective. Eighty-four per cent maintained relationships with people from their host country, and 66 per cent reported taking on bridging roles between people from different cultures. The report notes,

“Scholars said that the Gilman Scholarship provided an opportunity for them to develop an analytic framework through which to observe the work and scrutinize information about it.” (p.5).

The Gilman Scholars reported that their international study experience had expanded their professional horizons by broadening the geographic scope of their future work as well as introducing them to new academic fields and interests. Sixty-seven percent of respondents aspired to work in an international or cross-cultural field as a result of their scholarship experience.

The program enabled graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds to expand their world view, develop new competencies and become more competitive in the global labour market.

Fifty-nine percent actually applied to work in companies with an international or cross-cultural focus. Thirty percent of respondents accepted positions where they could travel abroad. The program enabled graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds to expand their world view, develop new competencies and become more competitive in the global labour market.

In addition to seeking work with an internationally-minded organisation, respondents found positions where they could interact with people from different backgrounds. Workplace diversity was a priority to many of the graduates. Although language study was not a requirement of the scholarship, 45 per cent of respondents subsequently worked in an environment where they could use their language skills. Learning abroad supported the scholars in clarifying their career direction. Many Gilman scholars have pursued or are pursuing graduate studies. The report states that a notable proportion of respondents “chose academic areas that would develop the skills needed to address global challenges including food security, medical services for the poor, and the internationalization of higher education” (p.24).

06 United States & Australia

The impact of study abroad on career skill and job attainment for the University of Minnesota alumni (Anderson, 2015)

Understanding the early career benefits of learning abroad programs (Potts, 2015)

Building consistency in learning abroad outcomes research, several studies have modified the instrument used in the ERASMUS studies (see Bracht, et. al., 2006) and applied this to local samples. Potts' 2015 Australian study is another example of this. To understand the impact of learning abroad on careers, the University of Minnesota surveyed alumni who had participated in learning abroad programs over a period of more than 30 years. The survey also included questions from the IES alumni studies (Dwyer, 2004). The final sample included 712 learning abroad participants, with higher representation from females (73 per cent) and white graduates (89 per cent). Sixty two percent of the sample was over 26 at the time of the study.

Anderson found that 64 per cent of alumni considered their learning abroad experience worthwhile for acquiring skills that influenced their career. When asked about specific skills and competencies, stronger responses were reported. Ninety one per cent of respondents agreed that learning abroad contributed to their maturity and personal development. Eighty seven percent attributed learning abroad for the development of self-confidence, and an ability to appreciate and interact with different individuals. With regard to interpersonal and communication skills, 84 per cent strongly or very strongly believed that learning abroad contributed to the enhancement of their skills.

When asked about the impact of learning abroad in obtaining their first job, the results were less definitive. Forty three per cent of respondents were neutral on this item, while 53 per cent strongly or very strongly believed that study abroad had an impact on securing their first job.

In comparison, 66 per cent of Australian graduates believed that learning abroad had made an impact on securing their first job, while 30 per cent were neutral. These results may reflect the labour market at the time of graduation. As discussed previously, a more competitive labour market may favour graduates with different educational experiences.

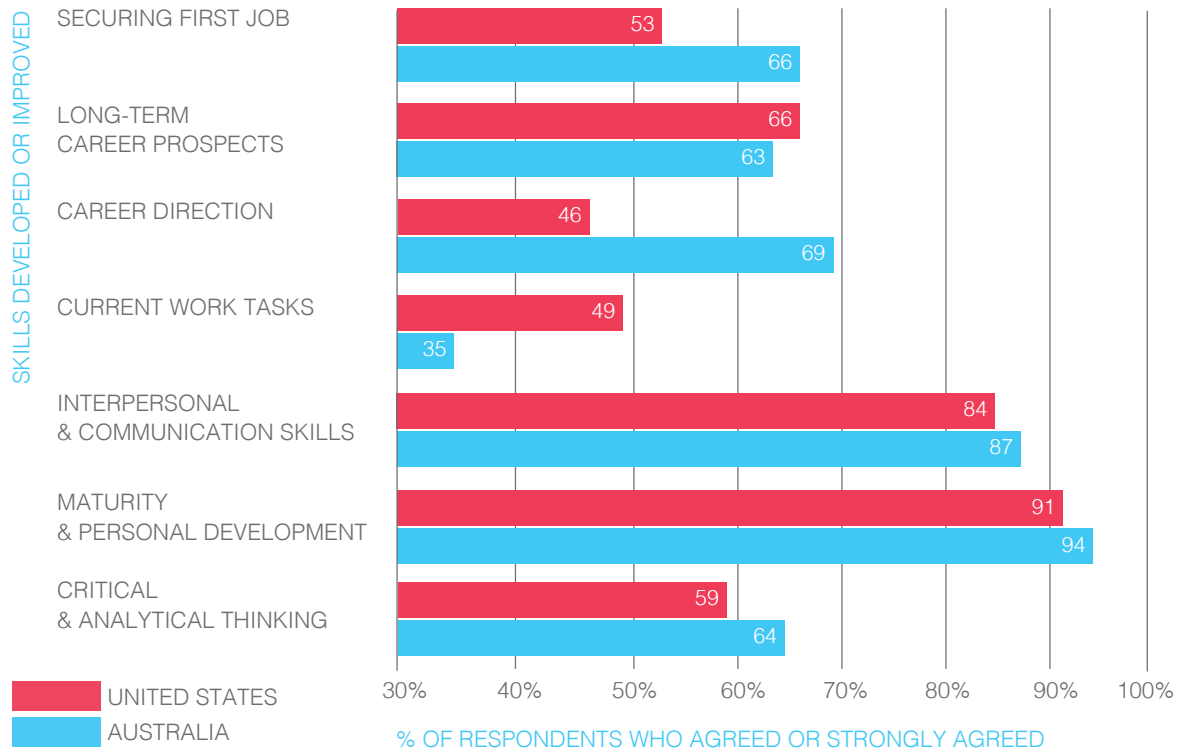
Considering longer-term effects, 66 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that learning abroad had a positive influence on their career prospects. Overall, 86 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that learning abroad had a lasting impact on their world view.

Table 6 compares the results for graduates from the US and Australia noting that the Australian sample was younger than the US sample. The Australian study included a national sample of 226 respondents who had been working for 3–5 years at the time of the survey (see Potts, 2016 for a more complete summary of this paper).

Alumni surveys conducted without a comparison group are helpful in providing an understanding of the perception of former participants of learning abroad. Results may overstate the impact of learning abroad because respondents are more likely to represent those who can report a positive experience. To increase the rigour of alumni surveys, the use of comparison groups can offer a better framework for statistical analysis, as long as the study also accounts for demographic, academic and personal characteristics that may vary between participants and non-participants.

TABLE 6 IMPACT OF LEARNING ABROAD

Graduate perceptions from the University of Minnesota (Anderson, 2014) and Australia (Potts, 2015).



07 United States

The long-term influence of interning abroad on career and professional development in the global economy

Cleary (2014)

International internships are rarely the subject of published research, so this study makes an important contribution to research and practice. For this dissertation project, Cleary studied alumni of a liberal arts degree of an elite, comprehensive US research institution five and 10 years after graduation and found that an internship abroad “served as a gateway or differentiator, contributing to their professional success” (p.143). Compared to alumni who had not interned abroad, former internship participants had a much higher likelihood of living and working abroad at the time of the study, and were more likely to work for an employer located outside the US.

The mixed methods study used an alumni career survey to compare outcomes of three groups: alumni who studied abroad, alumni who interned abroad and alumni who did not go abroad for study or an internship. For the five year cohort, there were 853 respondents of which 45 per cent (326) undertook an international experience and 7 per cent (62) completed an internship. For the 10-year cohort, there were 605 respondents, with 42 per cent (245) having undertaken study abroad and 3 per cent (24) an internship (86 total internship participants). An additional survey was completed by 50 of the internship participants, and an in-depth interview was conducted with 16 participants.

Compared to alumni who had not interned abroad, former internship participants had a much higher likelihood of living and working abroad at the time of the study, and were more likely to work for an employer located outside the US.

The importance of this study is not in the breadth of the sample, which is difficult to accomplish with long-term alumni surveys, but in the depth of the analysis. Cleary (a career practitioner and researcher) approaches the findings from a career development perspective and this introduces us to a number of theories and approaches not often highlighted in learning abroad literature.

Many graduates selected career paths based on the influence of natural abilities and environmental conditions and events (Learning Theory of Career Counseling (LTCC) (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990). Living and working in another culture can be an environmental condition or event, that builds on natural abilities and instincts. Future careers of students who interned abroad were more likely to either have an international scope, or involve an international organisation or industry. The author suggests that knowledge and skills gained abroad often translate into career-relevant knowledge and skills.

08 Australia Graduate Outcomes Survey

Department of Education and Training (2016)

This study is being presented with the full acknowledgement that employment is not the same as employability. However, where limited data exists, we need to consider all available resources to advance our understanding of the topic. The Australian Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) is the annual post-graduation assessment of the early employment outcomes for graduates of Australian higher education institutions. The survey was refreshed in 2016 and a question was added to determine if the respondent studied abroad during their degree program.

The sample included 104,208 graduates of 96 institutions (including 40 universities) who were contacted four months after graduation (respondents graduated mid-2015 to early 2016). Top level data demonstrates a four per cent difference in full-time employment rates, with those who studied abroad during their undergraduate degree more likely to be in full-time employment (74 per cent compared with 70 per cent).

Gender may account for the difference, with 76 per cent of male graduates who undertook overseas study in full-time employment compared with 72 per cent who did not study abroad. For females, the gap was very small and therefore not likely to be meaningful (74 per cent compared with 73 per cent).

Three discipline groupings were also reported and the results are displayed in Table 7. The largest difference in full-time employment rate, 9 per cent, was in the health disciplines. The difference in management and commerce was negligible.

Although the analysis is a good first step in using national graduate employment data to consider the impact of learning abroad on employment, other factors must be considered when assessing the results. Firstly, there is no accounting for self-selection, institutional effects or student backgrounds. Secondly, the data appears to be heavily impacted by the likelihood of further study. For the first time in 2016, the GOS data includes graduates who are in further study as part of the labour force. This means that respondents who are studying for a further qualification are included in the full-time employment statistics.

This may account for some of the gender gap. Male respondents were more likely to be in further full-time study (only) than female respondents. Additionally, 45.5 per cent of male respondents reporting to be in full-time study were in full-time work, compared with 50.7 per cent of female respondents – female respondents were more likely to be working full-time and studying full-time, boosting the full-time work participation for females.

TABLE 7 Australian graduate employment rate by discipline and learning abroad participation.

DISCIPLINE	STUDIED ABROAD (%)	DID NOT STUDY ABROAD (%)
Science, technology, engineering and maths	71	66
Management and commerce	72	73
Health	90	81

Some of the discipline differences may also be explained by other factors. This includes the likelihood of respondents being in further study, whether certain disciplines within the grouping are more heavily dominated by males or females, and whether certain disciplines have a higher likelihood of study abroad. For example, within the health sciences, it is generally more difficult to fit overseas study into a highly-prescribed study program such as medicine. Similarly, students may be less likely to choose to study abroad because of the highly competitive nature of the cohort.

While at first glance, the top-line data appears to support the case for learning abroad having a positive impact on graduate employment, the results need to be interpreted with caution. Other factors such as family background may have a stronger impact on employment.

While at first glance, the top-line data appears to support the case for learning abroad having a positive impact on graduate employment, the results need to be interpreted with caution.

The age of the graduate is another important variable to consider – according to the GOS report, younger graduates are less likely to be in full-time employment and more likely to be in full-time study four months after graduation. A more comprehensive model is needed for the Australian sector to make confident claims about the impact of learning abroad on graduate job prospects. Nevertheless, the data collected in the GOS is a positive step forward and analysis may become more nuanced in the future.



09 United Kingdom

Gone international 2016: The value of global mobility

Universities UK (2016)

The UK Gone International report, produced by Universities UK, uses a data set similar to the Australian GOS survey. The analysis is taken one step further. Researchers contacted the 2013/14 graduating cohort six months after graduation. Those who had participated in study, work or volunteering programs abroad of more than one week in duration were classified as mobile. The sample size was 13,355 mobile students and 245,620 non-mobile students and included only graduates of an undergraduate degree.

Six months after graduation, learning abroad participants were 1.2 per cent more likely to be employed. For graduates classified as low socio-economic status, the employment rate of both mobile and non-mobile groups was lower, but the advantage for mobile graduates was consistent at 1.2 per cent. Mobile graduates were more academically successful and more likely to be undertaking further study. Additionally, mobile graduates reported higher salaries.

However, the results need to be contextualised in the same way as the Australian study. There was a large difference in participation rates for the most advantaged students who were five times more likely to study abroad than their low socio-economic category peers. The study does not control for academic results prior to participation in learning abroad and therefore the results may show bias in favour of high academic achievers (many exchange programs have a minimum academic requirement). To interpret the results another way, students who participated in learning abroad programs were more likely to have higher grades and more likely to achieve first class or upper second class degrees. Similarly, their academic results, intelligence, family networks, institution of study or other unmeasured factors may impact upon their employment status.

TABLE 8 UK graduate outcomes based on learning abroad participation status

	MOBILE (%)	NOT MOBILE (%)
Unemployment rate	5.4	6.6
Lower SES group - unemployment rate	5.0	6.2
Engaged in further study	21.3	17.9
Average annual salary	£21,349	£20,519
First class or upper second class degree	81	72

CONCLUSION

This research digest has identified many positive research findings on the connection between learning abroad and employability. Learning abroad is reported to contribute to human capital development, often in ways that supplement learning on the home campus. However, causality cannot be easily demonstrated. Accordingly, we must take a holistic view of the potential benefits of learning abroad while recognising the limitations on our ability to isolate factors from the broader context of an individual's personal and professional development.

As outlined at the start of this paper, acknowledging that employability is not the same as employment is fundamental to outcomes measurement. Learning abroad may only indirectly impact graduate employment rates and graduate salaries. Limitations to this research also includes the generalizability of the findings across contexts and the likelihood that the data reflects an overly optimistic picture of the phenomenon of interest when participants are asked to opt-in to the study. Results reported here should always be used with appropriate explanations and methodological limitations. More complex modelling that controls for a range of personal and educational factors, such as the Di Pietro study, is necessary before such findings should be used to promote learning abroad.

Cultural context and the state of the local labour market appears to impact the design of research studies and the findings. For example, in Europe and Japan, developing capacity in a second language can impact upon career direction and employment outcomes. In Australia, the US and the UK, second language capacity may be important to some graduates, but the research findings are less conclusive. In economies where competition for jobs is higher, learning abroad appears to provide a competitive edge in the graduate employment market.

In summary, learning abroad facilitates skills development and provides an environment for applying new and existing skills. Many of these skills are transferable to a work setting, as long as participants are encouraged to reflect on their experiences, identify the skills they have developed and articulate how these skills may be applied in other situations. There is also evidence to support the distinct impact of learning abroad on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These findings should encourage further policy developments to expand access to international study to all students such as through the Gilman Scholarship Program.

Further research into the connections between learning abroad and employability will support continued investment in the expansion of international study opportunities by countries, institutions and individual students and their families. Three specific areas of research should be prioritised by the international education community:

1. The impact of various models of learning abroad programs on outcomes
2. Longitudinal tracer research on the enduring impacts of learning abroad, and
3. The function of learning abroad in supporting educational and career outcomes for disadvantaged students.

As nations and their people become more interdependent for security, trade, investment and social development, facilitating international mobility of future generations will become increasingly important. Research helps us to understand why learning abroad matters and how we can optimise the experience for all participants.

REVIEWED PAPERS

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Contact us

+61 3 9925 4579
admin@ieaa.org.au

ieaa.org.au

