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early intercultural
experiences and
careers
in international education



AN AUSTRALIAN SURVEY OF
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS

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In Australia, international education is worth more than \$34 billion and creates an estimated 247,450 full-time equivalent jobs (DET, 2019). In 2019, international education professionals in Australia are recruiting, supporting and graduating more international students than ever before. The complexity of delivering services to ever diversifying stakeholders is intensifying and specialist roles and new operating models are emerging. Yet very little is known about international education as a profession and what motivates those who join this large and growing sector.

Careers in Australian international education are not defined by clear professional frameworks. Occupational categories are diverse and qualifications held by those working in international education are varied, reflecting a lack rather than an abundance, of career development pathways and specific training. This contrasts with other large service-based industries in Australia – such as tourism – for which numerous specialised undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, graduate recruitment programs, professional bodies and qualifications exist. The need to create professional development approaches that attract new talent, promote the profession and strengthen the sector has recently been recognised by Australia’s largest association for international education¹.

Anecdotally, many international education professionals have had an intercultural experience during their secondary or tertiary studies, or early in their professional careers. While it is well established that learning in an intercultural context is transformative, there is a paucity of research about how intercultural experiences influence the career trajectories of international education professionals working in the Australian context.

It can be argued that international educational professionals may choose to pursue a career in their sector precisely because of their direct experience and awareness of, or familiarity with, international education contexts.

By focusing on this previously unexplored subset of international education professionals, that is, those who have undertaken an intercultural experience in their formative years, we hope to contribute to the development of stronger professionalisation of the broader international education sector.

What do we know about international education career pathways?

Research examining international careers is biased towards the corporate sector (Bozionelos et al, 2015; Reichel, 2015), with numerous studies exploring the drivers of expatriate careers and not specific careers in international education (for example, Farcas, 2017; Suutari, Brewster, Makela, Dickmann & Tornikoski, 2017). There is an apparent crossover, however, in the drivers towards both types of careers. For example, Puntaney (2016) identifies the key factors influencing an expatriate to accept an overseas assignment as having a love of travel and interest in learning about other cultures; an opportunity to use foreign language skills; and previous experience living and/or working abroad.

¹ The International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) is currently developing the association’s first ‘Professional Learning Framework’, which is due to launch in July 2019.

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What is unclear, however, are the ways in which these factors, particularly 'previous experience', influence the decision-making process to enter a particular career.

In their study of the antecedents of international graduates' career interests, Bozionelos et al (2015) noted that direct experience influences career choice. For example, students who engage in internships are more likely to pursue a career in the same industry (Lee & Cholo, 2013 cited in Bozionelos et al, 2015). Numerous researchers have investigated the careers of study abroad alumni to explore the relationship between study abroad experiences and international careers (see Bryla, 2015; Dwyer, 2004; Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Ostanina, 2005 cited in Franklin, 2010).

Through an examination of 3,723 study abroad alumni from 1950 to 1999, the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) retrospective study (Norris & Gillespie, 2009) is one of the largest to consider how an overseas study experience impacts an individual's career. However, this refers to any career, and not to a specific career in international education.

The authors concluded that there was a moderate to significant effect, with a majority of respondents reporting their subsequent engagement in an internationally-oriented workplace and half confirming they had volunteered or worked abroad since graduating. Study abroad experiences were influential in gaining employment overseas as alumni identified a specific skill set which influenced their career². Interestingly, Rundstrom Williams (2005) and Bartel-Radic (2014) both found that international experiences, including study abroad, also enhanced the intercultural competence of participants. Similar results to the IES Study were found through the VALERA research project in Europe (Bracht et al, 2006).

It is well-established that career decision-making is not rational but is instead influenced by happenstance and serendipitous events such as professional and personal contacts, unexpected exposure, 'being in the right place at the right time' and the support and encouragement of others (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996). Importantly, Betsworth and Hansen also noted that 'previous experience' is a strong driver of career decision-making.

Although there appears to be a significant relationship between previous experience and employment generally, including between international experiences and international employment, it is not known what motivates those who choose careers in international education specifically. Underscoring the lack of research into international education careers is the relative youth of the sector; international education in Australia is a sector that is yet to turn 50. What we do know is that those who seek out international experiences early in life are also likely to seek out international careers; with Betsworth and Hansen's (1996) work suggesting that those with an international education experience may serendipitously fall into working in that very field. This is the premise for our study, which is further outlined on the next page.

² It is also interesting to note that these studies focus on graduates, who have study abroad experiences, and subsequently explore their varied career trajectories. In contrast, our study focuses on those already engaged in the international education sector to trace the roots of their career pathway. In this way, our study is retrospective, rather than future-focused.

About the study

In 2018, our research team explored the role of early intercultural experiences on the careers of international education professionals in the Australian context. The aim of the study was to understand the impact these intercultural experiences had on career pathways within international education and to identify 'personas' of international education professionals. We wanted to understand how future generations of international education professionals could be better supported through more defined career pathways and how international education career frameworks could be strengthened in Australia.

In our study, an intercultural experience was defined as 'a structured program or planned experience based upon meaningful interactions of individuals from different cultures'. Examples include:

- Participation in a formal student exchange program, an overseas study tour or a volunteer abroad program
- Hosting a student from another country
- Learning a foreign language
- Extended travel abroad, living abroad or working abroad.

Respondents were recruited through international education professional associations and social media networks³. Two hundred and sixty-eight respondents participated in an online survey which collected both quantitative and qualitative data geared towards our primary research question: What role does an early intercultural learning experience play in the careers of international education professionals?

Questions focused on three key areas:

1. Qualifications and career roles

In addition to examining different formal education pathways, we collected demographic data about the diversity of roles across different sectors in Australia's international education industry as well as the duration respondents had spent in their current role and in the sector more broadly.

2. Intercultural experiences

Respondents provided information on the motivating factors of their intercultural experiences and the type, duration and location of intercultural experiences across three phases:

1. during secondary education
2. during post-secondary education
3. early career (first five years of work).

This allowed for meaningful comparisons of the types of, and drivers for, intercultural experiences throughout the formative years of international education professionals.

3. Drivers for working in international education

We questioned respondents about the factors that motivated them to commence employment in international education, including the perceived impact of their intercultural experiences on career planning and progress in international education.

³ While we initially intended to focus our survey on those working in Australian international education, this became difficult to define due to transnational education, mobile careers and the international nature of the sector. Respondents who are not currently residing in Australia were not excluded from results.

Our research findings

Qualifications and career pathways

Our survey attracted a diverse range of respondents who reside all over the world including in Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Of the 268 respondents, two thirds were female, and the average age of all respondents was 44. Interestingly, 41 per cent of respondents held a Bachelor of Arts. Overwhelmingly, most respondents currently work in higher education (71%), with other key sectors including vocational education and training (15%) and not-for-profit organisations (12%). The duration of respondents' work experience in international education ranged from two months to 40 years.

Intercultural experiences

Overwhelmingly, respondents confirmed an intercultural experience in their formative years with many respondents reporting multiple intercultural experiences during their secondary and post-secondary education and in their early careers. The most prevalent type of intercultural experience was 'extended travel / lived abroad' (21%) followed by formal study of a language other than English (19%); 'student exchange' (13%); and 'hosting students from another country' (11%).



HEADLINE FINDINGS

55%

of respondents had an intercultural experience in high school, **67%** during post-secondary education, and **74%** in their early careers.

71%

of respondents said their intercultural experience influenced their decision to work in international education.

81%

of respondents said the skills they learnt during their intercultural experiences gave them the tools to work in international education.

More than half (55%) of respondents reported having an intercultural experience during their secondary education. More respondents reported studying a language other than English and hosting students from another country during this phase than during or after post-secondary education. Interestingly, nearly half of all respondents were international exchange students during their high school years. Family members, friends and mentors played a greater role in encouraging respondents to undertake an intercultural experience during secondary education than in the other two phases.

Two-thirds of respondents reported an intercultural experience during their post-secondary education. The number of respondents who reported studying a language other than English and hosting students from other countries declined significantly and only 11 per cent of respondents undertook an intercultural experience as a mandatory part of their post-secondary education program. While seeking 'a different experience' (72%) and 'interest in other cultures' (72%) were overwhelmingly important motivating factors for undertaking an intercultural experience, 31 per cent of respondents also linked their intercultural experience to an intention to improve their employability.

Seventy-four per cent of respondents had an intercultural experience within five years of graduating from post-secondary education. As expected, during this phase many respondents were engaged in both paid work (49%) and unpaid work, which included teaching English as well as undertaking international internships and work experience. 'Improving employability' (42%) and 'earning money' (31%) were key motivating factors for these respondents in seeking out their intercultural experience in addition to gaining 'a different experience' (68%) and 'interest in other cultures' (68%).

Drivers for working in Australia's international education sector

For most respondents, the primary driver for working in international education is their passion for interacting with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Most respondents (89%) reported that their intercultural experience was transformative, with over two thirds indicating that their intercultural experience influenced their decision to work in international education. This suggests a link between early intercultural experiences and careers in international education. Furthermore, 81 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the skills they learnt during their intercultural experiences gave them the knowledge and attributes to work in international education.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (91%) have remained connected to other participants of their intercultural experiences and 64 per cent of respondents have used these connections in their professional work in international education. For our respondents, intercultural experiences are not only important to their lives and to forging life-long connections, but also important for the development of their careers in international education.

However, while respondents believe their intercultural experience influenced their decision to work in international education, 58 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their career path into international education was unplanned. Only one third of respondents agreed that their career pathway into international education was encouraged by a mentor or friend. Despite this lack of intentional, planned career pathways and support from mentors, most respondents reported a commitment to the sector, with 69 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that their future career path revolves around international education.

Using personas to understand international education professionals



Figure 1: International education personas

Although Australia's international education sector is represented by a diverse range of people, the research team identified four personas, which illustrate the different experiences, motivations and needs of international education professionals.

Our research demonstrates that Australia's international education sector is represented by a diverse range of professionals. We were able, however, to extract four personas from our data, which illustrate the experiences, motivations and needs of international education professionals⁴. These personas may also assist in targeting professional development and learning frameworks to build sector capability.

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates the prevalence of early intercultural experiences among international education professionals working in the Australian context. Intercultural experiences are transformative and important as stand-alone experiences as well as being important to a career in Australian international education.

This new knowledge can help sector stakeholders to further develop and strengthen the international education profession in Australia. For example, current cohorts of young Australians participating in intercultural experiences as well as international students completing Australian qualifications can be targeted for planned careers in the sector.

Our research also highlights the need for formal learning frameworks for the diverse range of careers in international education as well as mentoring programs to attract, support and retain talent and to promote the profession more broadly. This will strengthen a sector that has a deep impact on the Australian economy and the lives of many students.

⁴ Personas are fictional characters based on user groupings drawn from research. The purpose of our personas is to create reliable and realistic representations of key segments of respondents.

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