



Do employers value international study and internships? A comparative analysis of 31 countries



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ABSTRACT

International student mobility is often promoted as enhancing graduates' employability in globalised labour markets. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on this assumed causal link remains limited. Particularly the perspectives of employers remains understudied. Therefore, in this paper I analyse (1) whether European employers value study abroad; (2) which specific skills employers need when valuing international experience; and (3) whether 'signaling effects' of employing international graduates exist. The analyses are based on Flash Eurobarometer 304 'Employers' perception of graduate employability' (n = 7036), conducted in 31 countries. The results reveal that a minority of employers consider international experience when making recruitment decisions. However, significant variability across the countries can be detected. Furthermore, the findings indicate that international education is particularly valued when employers need graduates with good foreign language and decision-making skills. In addition, the results indicate that with higher shares of foreign graduates in a company, the likelihood international experience is valued increases.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, intra-European student mobility has been increasingly promoted by the European Commission. The annual budget allocated to the Erasmus programme, the most popular exchange programme for higher education students, for example, exceeds 450 million euro (Souto Otero et al., 2013). Besides cultural and social rationales, the promotion of intra-EU student mobility is associated with economic benefits: study abroad would enhance the competitiveness of Europe among global knowledge economies (Van Mol, 2014b). Overall, it is expected that study abroad enhances students' employability, as international students would improve, for example, their language proficiency, intercultural skills and independency (e.g. Anquetil, 2006; European Commission, 2016; Van Mol, 2014b).

However, little empirical evidence supports the idea that study abroad would lead to employment gains. Although student mobility is generally promoted as giving students a competitive advantage for their future careers, empirical research into the link between student mobility and employability remains surprisingly scarce (Crossman and Clarke, 2010; Li, 2013). Whereas a handful of studies focused on mobile and non-mobile students' perspectives on employability (e.g. Brooks et al., 2012; Wiers-Jenssen,

2011), the perspective of employers has been largely neglected (Van Mol, 2014a). This is rather unfortunate, as employers form the link between employability and actual employment (Prokou, 2008). Consequently, in this paper I focus on employers' perceptions of international learning experiences. The analyses are based on Flash Eurobarometer 304 'Employers' perception of graduate employability', which surveyed companies with more than 50 employees in all (current) EU-Member States, Iceland, Norway and Turkey in 2010 (n = 7036).

This paper advances the literature on international student mobility and employability in several ways. First, most previous research on the employability of (formerly) international students focused on students, policy-makers or higher education practitioners' perceptions and students early career experiences in the labour market. Differences in labour market trajectories between those who spent a study abroad and those who remained at home are thereby often attributed *a posteriori* to their international exchange. This paper complements these perspectives by empirically investigating whether employers actually consider study abroad as a selection criterion when recruiting graduates. Second, the handful of available empirical studies incorporating the perspectives of employers mainly rely on rather limited case-study evidence (e.g. Crossman and Clarke, 2010), oversampled companies employing Erasmus interns (e.g. European Commission, 2014), had very low response rates (e.g. Bracht et al., 2006) or a

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low number of companies per country (European Commission, 2014), introducing a significant bias in the data. To my knowledge, this paper is one of the first papers to provide a large-scale international comparative analysis on employers' perspectives. Third, most research focused on graduates' experiences *studying* abroad. I extend this perspective by also incorporating employers' perspective on international internships. This is particularly relevant in the European context, as a growing share of students go abroad as part of work placement schemes (Deakin, 2014), and it has been reported employers might place more value on previous international work experience instead of a study period abroad, as work-based experience might provide a better preparation for the world of work.

2. Background

2.1. Graduate employability

Graduate employability is generally understood as the skills and abilities of a graduate to find employment, remain in employment or obtain new employment when required (Hillage and Pollard, 1998; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007; Thijssen et al., 2008). It has become a key term when defining outcomes of higher education as today there is an 'explicit concern with universities producing new workers' (Morley, 2001: 131). Governments and employers now expect higher education institutions to prepare graduates for the world of work (De La Harpe et al., 2000; Heaton et al., 2008), as graduates 'are perceived as potential key players in the drive towards enhancing value-added products and services in an economy demanding stronger skill-sets and advanced technical knowledge' (Tomlinson, 2012: 408). As such, there is a general expectancy that higher education institutions should ensure qualifications match the needs of labour markets (Prokou, 2008). Particularly in the aftermath of the economic crisis, there has been an increasing emphasis on how higher education systems can meet employers' needs, which is reflected, for example, by the national and European programmes on the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education (Pavlin and Svetlik, 2014). Influenced by the quantitative benchmarks on international student mobility set by the European Commission, higher education institutions today often stress the relevance of international student mobility for – among other outcomes – enhancing graduates' employability. Nevertheless, it remains an open question whether or not employers really take international experiences of graduates into account when making recruitment decisions.

2.2. The added value of international student mobility for employability – theoretical perspectives

Inspired by Bourdieu, Munk (2009) formulated the theoretical notion of 'informational capital' in relation to international student mobility. When students go abroad, they accumulate knowledge and intercultural skills on the one hand, and 'symbolic capital' invoking a 'signaling effect' which distinguishes them from non-mobile graduates on the other hand. Two theoretical approaches can be connected to this notion, namely human capital theory and signaling theory (see also Cai, 2013).

In human capital theory, it has been postulated that investments in education enhance individuals' knowledge and skills, which are rewarded in the labour market in terms of better occupational opportunities and returns (Becker, 1975; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). Nevertheless, today investments in (higher) education do not automatically guarantee a smooth education-to-work transition, as an increasing number of people obtain the same degree, leading to an inflation of educational qualifications

(e.g. Rauhvargers, 2011; Tomlinson, 2012). In such a context, student mobility 'might be perceived by young adults as a way to achieve a competitive advantage for their entrance into the labour market after graduation' (Van Mol, 2014b: 31). International mobility can then be considered an additional investment in human capital, as specific skills such as foreign language skills, personal development and intercultural competences are expected to be gained abroad. International students particularly point to benefit from study abroad in terms of interpersonal and communication skills, teamwork skills and problem solving and analytical skills (e.g. Potts, 2015), as well as increased foreign language proficiency (Van Mol, 2014b) and intercultural skills (e.g. Anquetil, 2006). Employers might make inferences about these specific skills when an applicant mentions a study and/or internship abroad in his/her résumé.

The human capital perspective mainly focuses on an individual's responsibility to invest in his/her education in order to enhance employability. A complementary perspective is offered by the signaling theory (Faia, 1981; Spence, 1973; Stiglitz, 1975), which postulates that 'hiring is an investment decision for employers' (Cai, 2013: 459). Employers screen job applications looking for signals for credentials that candidates have certain desired skills. Foreign education thereby signals specific skills (e.g. intercultural and language skills) and personal characteristics to employers (Wiers-Jenssen, 2008a), i.e. the 'symbolic capital' in Munk's framework. From the perspective of signaling theory, in a globalised world employers would receive the signal of foreign credentials. Furthermore, these signals are subject to change. After all, employers make hiring decisions under conditions of uncertainty (Protsch and Solga, 2015; Spence, 1973), and their experiences with graduates with similar profiles might therefore influence their recruitment decisions. For example, when an employer employs more graduates with international experience and these graduates perform well in the company, an employer might be more inclined to contract other graduates with international experiences, as they might make inferences on specific skills they know these graduates possess. Consequently, it can be expected employers who employ more international graduates, value international experience more highly.

2.3. The added value of study/internships abroad for employability – existing empirical evidence from some European countries

Research in non-European countries revealed that study abroad is indeed often connected to the idea of increased employability, both by students and their families (Bodycott, 2009; Waters, 2007; Xiang and Shen, 2009), as well as by employers (see e.g. Rizvi, 2000; Waters, 2007). Recent research in Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom, however, partly contradict these findings. From a student's perspective, employability has been documented as one of the main drivers for work placement mobility from the UK (Deakin, 2014). It also figures within the decision-making process of those who go on short term exchanges such as Erasmus, but it seems to play a more secondary role, as it is rarely the most important motivation for going abroad (e.g. Findlay et al., 2006; Van Mol, 2014a; Waters and Brooks, 2010). Most existing empirical studies, furthermore, report a rather pessimistic perspective of European students in terms of the value of studying abroad for their employability. This holds both for credit mobility (whereby students spend an exchange period at a foreign higher education institution) and degree mobility (whereby students obtain their degree in another country). Brooks et al. (2012) showed, for example, that many formerly mobile British students think many employers do not value a study period abroad or a foreign degree, and some even believed foreign education decreased their chances of getting a job. Similar findings have been reported

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