



Influence of pre-graduation international experiences on early career internationalization: The mediation effect of career capital

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a model to examine whether changes in career capital (knowing-why, knowing-how, knowing-whom) of graduates mediated the relationship between pre-graduation international activities and career internationalization. Results of a study conducted on a sample of business graduates show that the mediation effect of career capital is partial: only knowing-why is a significant mediator, suggesting the key role played by individual self-awareness over and beyond knowledge/skills and personal relationships in decisions related to early career internationalization. Further, only the more intense pre-graduation international ("immersion") activities directly affect the degree of career internationalization. Implications for firms interested in hiring young professionals oriented toward international careers are discussed.

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Introduction

The positive impact of international study experiences before graduation on international career development has been studied in different national contexts (e.g. Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008). However, research on workers mobility shows that in only a few cases the knowledge and skills learned by young people during international experiences translate into positive attitudes toward international work (European Commission, 2010). In this study, we set out to better understand the relationship between international experiences before graduation and international work, through the theoretical lens of career capital.

Career capital reflects the competencies developed by individuals over their careers, and can be expressed as three ways of knowing – knowing-how, knowing-whom and knowing-why (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Historically, the development of career capital was considered firm specific. However, DeFillippi and Arthur (1994), given the increasing inter-firm mobility of employees, proposed that the development of career competencies should be considered at the micro-level, or "level of the person" (p. 308). Knowing-why competencies provide insights into the motivations behind career choices, and how individuals find meaning and identify personally with their careers. Knowing-how reflects that package of job- and career-relevant knowledge, skills,

and expertise developed throughout one's career. Knowing-whom encompasses the professional and personal network of relationships that are developed over time.

In this study we expand the traditional notion that career capital is accumulated primarily through a sequence of work experiences (e.g. Dickmann & Doherty, 2008; Suutari & Mäkelä, 2007), suggesting that career competencies can be accumulated before entering the labor market. By doing so, we introduce possible new ways of considering the development of career capital over and above through work experiences. In particular, we propose that international experiences before graduation affect individual's career capital in a way the young graduate has the right resources to start an international career. As a consequence, we propose at the outset that career capital does play a mediating role between participation in international experiences and decisions to pursue international careers. We do so by exploring the extent that Italian university business graduates' career capital is modified by international experience before graduation, and whether these changes in career capital influence career outcomes, in particular, the degree of career internationalization.

We aim to contribute to the literature in several ways. First, with few exceptions (Ryan, Silvanto, & Brown, 2013 for example), studies exploring international experiences of university students primarily focus on study experiences. This research considers a wide range of international experiences, incorporating a previously unexplored dimension to the previous works. Second, it is the only study to measure the effect that international experiences prior to graduation have on the development of career capital. By adopting and extending the classification of international activities proposed by

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Vance (2005), this study adds to our understanding of how different kinds of international experiences can influence the development of career capital, an under-researched area in international human resource management (Jokinen, 2010; Kohonen, 2005). We do so by developing an index of internationalization accumulated by a graduate prior to starting a professional career, which is of particular significance because of the favorable views that employers have about international experiences (Inkson, Arthur, Pringle, & Barry, 1997). Third, this research, by studying how international experiences outside of the professional realm influence the development of career capital, extends the extant literature on careers which calls for more consideration to be given to the relationship between international work and career outcomes (Bonache, Brewster, Suutari, & De Saá, 2010; Dickmann & Doherty, 2008). Finally, by considering a range of international career outcomes such as frequent travel, shorter-term international projects, and cross-border commuting to measure composite level of career internationalization, this study recognizes the broader definition of international work, over and above traditional expatriate assignments (Fenwick, 2004; Sparrow, 2007; Suutari & Brewster, 2000; Welch, 2003).

The remainder of the paper is laid out as follows. First we explore the relevant literature that informed this study, and present the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. The results along with a discussion of their implications are then offered. Finally, the paper considers the managerial implications of the results, and suggests directions for future research.

International experiences before graduation and international career

Studies concerning the effect of international experiences of young people on international careers are generally focused on study abroad programs.

In the European context, ERASMUS program (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), funded by the European Commission, encourages transnational student mobility between 33 European nations. Teichler and Janson (2007) evaluated multiple ERASMUS studies that captured the value that studying in other European countries had on subsequent employment, concluding that study abroad benefited students in a variety of ways: academically, culturally, linguistically, and professionally.

Focusing in particular on the effect on the international career, a longitudinal survey conducted by Teichler, Maiworm, and Kassel (1997), on former ERASMUS students who spent a period abroad, demonstrated that of those employed almost three years after return from the ERASMUS experience, about 18% were employed in a foreign country. The percentage of expatriates remained the same five years after return. Similar results were obtained in subsequent studies conducted in 1999 (Jahr & Teichler, 2000) and in 2005 (Bracht et al., 2006).

Even if all of these studies confirmed the positive effect of an international education experience before graduation on the subsequent career mobility (Rivza & Teichler, 2007), it has been noticed that the number of ERASMUS students reporting international dimensions of employment and work has declined somewhat in recent years (Janson, Schomburg, & Teichler, 2009). Furthermore, other surveys on European mobile students, not supported by ERASMUS program, reported smaller percentages of graduates that worked abroad after their graduation (e.g. Teichler, 2006).

Studies conducted in the United States obtain analogous results. One of the most comprehensive surveys was conducted in 2002 by the Institute for the International Education of Students, a not-for-profit consortium of United States universities and colleges that provides study abroad opportunities. From the analysis of career choices of almost 3700 alumni who had participated in its programs between 1950 and 1999, 20% of respondents who had studied abroad during

the 1990s reported that their international experience influenced them to expatriate in order to get a job (Norris & Gillespie, 2009). Fewer respondents worked for a multinational organization in the United States (15%) or were engaged in internationally oriented work (18%). Analyses of internationalization programs developed by specific universities found similar results (e.g. Franklin, 2010; Orahood, Kruze, & Pearson, 2004).

Ryan et al. (2013) also considered the impact of international study on international career mobility, expanding the scope of university-based educational programs from solely study abroad, to include university sponsored internship programs, and the average number of days students' spent overseas on project-based work. They concluded that global Master in Business Administration programs that emphasized international activities graduated students who were more internationally mobile in their careers.

There are only a few studies that do not support the existence of a positive effect of an international experience during higher education on international career. Wiers-Jenssen (2008) found that Norwegian graduates in business and administration who spent a period abroad during their studies do not obtain more international jobs than their domestically educated counterparts. Similarly Orahood, Woolf, and Kruze (2008), on a sample of American graduates, found that although business students who studied abroad tend to have a significantly larger interest in working for a multinational company, the number of graduates who worked for a company with an international focus was greater for those who did not study abroad. Thus they concluded that studying abroad "tends to have more impact on personal growth and development rather than on career choice" (p. 138).

On the whole, the studies suggested that there is positive effect of study abroad experiences on international careers but that it appears weak in absolute terms: indeed, both American and European studies showed that on average less than 2 out of 10 mobile students are employed in a country different from the country of graduation. Furthermore, this effect did not significantly increase in recent years.

Such weak effects may be related to the diverse reasons why students decide to spend a period abroad during their studies (e.g. learn a foreign language, opportunity for self-development, improve understanding of the host country), which are not strictly related with the aspiration to start an international career (Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011; Teichler, 2004). Furthermore, the study-to-work transition for students who decide to start an international career is not always a linear process but rather it is the result of a variegated combination of personal factors and contextual circumstances, such as the possibility to create a social network locally rooted, the receptivity of the host society to foreigners, work opportunities in the professional field of the university study, or citizenship considerations (Doherty, 2013; Mosneaga & Winther, 2013).

Adding to these explanations, we propose to focus on two additional elements which may explain the weak effect of international experience before graduation on the international career found by the extant literature: first, other than studying abroad people can be exposed to numerous and diverse international experiences before graduation; second, international careers can assume forms that are beyond "traditional" expatriation.

Preparing for the international career

There are a multitude of international and cultural experiences in addition to study abroad programs that, if undertaken prior to university graduation, can contribute to building cross-cultural capabilities. Vance (2005) considered pre-graduation experiences as the "foundation building" (p. 378) career phase where international awareness begins to develop in young people. Experiences can vary in terms of duration, intensity, home or host-country base, and

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