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European Management Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emj

The impact of international business education on career success—Evidence from Europe

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2016

Received in revised form

24 January 2017

Accepted 26 February 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

International business education

International experience

Global identity

Career success

ABSTRACT

In today's globalized world, career paths are becoming increasingly international, and so managers need respective cross-cultural strengths in order to act effectively in various cultural environments. Even though education—especially business education—is progressively becoming more international to meet these organizational demands, little is known about whether the extent of international business education influences careers, and in particular career success. In addressing this research deficit, we explore whether and how international business education affects career success. As the major contribution of this paper we suggest a conceptual framework which posits global identity and international experience as mediators of this relationship. The assumptions of this framework are confirmed by an investigation amongst 450 alumni of a European business school. Additional contributions include that we extend the limited body of research on the construct of international business education and its measurement, by providing an all-encompassing definition and much-needed operationalization. Furthermore, we contribute a European perspective on international business education through our empirical evidence.

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1. Introduction

Managing the complexities inherent in globalization is crucial for businesses. Despite extensive research on the people managing the complexities in the fields of international management, expatriate management (including cultural adaptation, cross-border learning processes, and required competencies), and international career paths (for an overview see Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2017), we know very little about the key factors that influence the success of international managers. One field that has been neglected in this context is research on the career impact of international business education. In this paper, therefore, we investigate how international business education influences the career success of managers.

In recent decades, the career paths of managers and professionals have become more international, and a shortage of truly

transnational managers has been identified (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2003). Such managers and professionals must possess certain knowledge, qualifications and competencies (Earley & Peterson, 2004). Accordingly, business education programs have evolved to produce these new “cosmopolitan” managers (Marcotte, Desroches, & Poupard, 2007). However, research into business education has focused mainly on educational level as a predictor of career success (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005), while the international orientation and international structures of business education programs have been neglected.

An investigation of the international dimension of business education is necessary for practical as well as academic reasons. From a practical point of view, the need to develop international business education programs is imposed externally on educational institutions through accreditation processes. Organizations offering accreditation, such as AACSB International (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) or EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System), encourage business schools to ensure a high level of internationalization (EFMD, 2014), and to offer globalized education and learning experiences also outside their home countries (AACSB International, 2011). These

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institutions emphasize that a reluctance to adapt to today's global reality would be at the school's "own peril" (AACSB International, 2011, p.4). Furthermore, we point to the increase in international business education over time and across countries—between 1975 and 2008, for instance, the number of students studying abroad rose from 0.4 million to 4 million, and additional growth is expected (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, & Härtel, 2013, p. 656). One of the most popular fields of study for internationally mobile students is the area of business and management (AACSB International, 2011). These developments underline the importance of understanding the impact of international business education programs on managers.

From an academic point of view, even though international business education has existed as a topic and as an activity for well over half a century (Kwok, Arpan, & Folks, 1994), it is not a well-defined field in research on management education. Some studies have examined various aspects of the development of international business education, such as curricula (Fugate & Jefferson, 2001), specific disciplines (e.g. Adhikari, Flanigan, & Tondkar, 1999; Eisenberg, Härtel, & Stahl, 2013), or the characteristics of certain regions, such as Europe or the US (e.g., Söderqvist, 2002; Terpstra, 1970). However, an all-encompassing definition and operationalization of the construct of international business education is still missing.

International business education is associated closely with learning. Key explanations of learning, such as behaviorist, cognitive, and social learning theories, assume that it involves both cognitive and emotional processes which may influence values, attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors (Festing, 2012). From a didactic perspective, the integration of experiential learning in the curricula of higher education institutions has received more attention than other approaches (e.g., Brennan, 2014; Regehr, 2013). Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) is commonly used in association with learning in an intercultural environment (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2010). We build on this view to argue that international business education is a learning process that contributes to the development of a global identity through, for example, global collaboration in intercultural teams (Erez, Lisak, Harush, Glikson, Nouri, & Shokef, 2013). Furthermore, students often do not have a lot of international experiences before they start their education, and thus it often provides students with their first international experiential learning experiences (e.g. a semester spent abroad), which have the potential to create an interest in gaining more international experience throughout the individual's professional career (Felker & Gianecchini, 2015). In summary, the willingness to interact in an international context can be strengthened during the education process through appropriate approaches to learning. Ultimately, these learning processes and their outcomes can result in career success (Vermeulen & Schmidt, 2008).

Career success manifests in an individual's own subjective perception, such as satisfaction, and in displays of objective and measurable factors (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), such as total compensation, promotions, and/or hierarchical status (Heslin, 2003). Some researchers stress the importance of subjective career success over objective career success (e.g., Aryee, Chay, & Tan, 1994). In this study, subjective career success is in the focus for several reasons. First, variations in objective career conditions, owing to industry and organizational specificities as well as the increasing unpredictability of employment and globalization, increase the significance and importance of subjective career success (Arthur et al., 2005). In turn, objective career success becomes difficult to measure, especially when dealing with an internationally and organizationally diverse sample, as is the case in this study. Second, increasing numbers of managers design their careers according to their individual (rather than organizational) choices.

They therefore become the most important evaluators of their own career success (Collin, 1998; Kohonen, 2005). Third, recent research comparing the conceptualizations of career success across 11 countries has shown that satisfaction is considered a highly important theme across the majority of those countries (Shen et al., 2015). Moreover, there are convincing indications that across 189 countries employees highlight the importance of intrinsic rewards that contribute to their job satisfaction more than they stress compensation (BCG & The Network, 2014).

The explanatory goal of this study consists of shedding light on how international business education influences subjective career success. Therein, career success is not investigated across its full range of predictors, including dispositional and organizational variables as well as stable individual differences (for an overview see Ng et al., 2005). Rather, we analyze phenomena closely related to the development of international business education in times of increasing complexities in the global market. The descriptive goal of the study is to provide an empirical analysis of parts of the European business educational environment and thereby contribute a much-needed European perspective (Khapova, Vinkenburger, & Arnold, 2009) to the US-dominated education research. In our investigation, we study alumni of the Master in Management (MIM) program, which has been developed by a leading European business school. "The MIM is mainly offered in Europe, but also in Asia, Australia, and Canada. In the US, the Master in Management is just emerging—in contrast to the MBA that is the most established postgraduate management education in North America" (Graf, 2015). Our normative goals are to provide guidance to individuals with regard to their choice of education programs and education-related investment decisions, and to support educational institutions in improving their offerings to match the needs of the globalized (corporate) world. Finally, our academic contributions include a new conceptual framework, which details the interplay between international business education and career success; new empirical evidence; and the development of an international business education measurement scale. In summary, we contribute to the field of international business education as well as career research.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, based on a literature review, we suggest a new framework for explaining the impact of international business education on career success, positing global identity and international experience as mediators. We then describe the methods chosen for the empirical study and present the results. Thereafter, we undertake an overall discussion of our study, including its limitations, directions for future research, and implications for theory and practice. We conclude with a brief summary of our results.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. The impact of international business education on subjective career success

Bartell (2003, pp. 51–52) defines international business education as a "synergistic, transformative process, involving the curriculum and research programs that influence the role and activities of all stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrators and the community-at-large". Given this definition, a high level of international business education implies building cross-cultural interactions into the formal and informal experience of educational life, and infusing the curriculum with international cases, perspectives, foreign-language studies, and exchange programs. These potential learning processes may result in three outcomes, respectively: "International awareness," which is stimulated by infusing the curriculum with international examples,

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