



Study Abroad Experience and Graduate Employability: Scottish Employers' Perspectives



national union of students scotland



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Executive Summary

This small-scale study was conceived to tentatively explore the link between student study abroad activity and graduate employability in a Scottish-specific context. In light of an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, the potential benefits of engaging in co-curricular activity opportunities to aid personal growth and development, build CVs and obtain greater competitive advantage in the jobs market, appear increasingly attractive. The research, conducted by NUS Scotland, and funded by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF), originated as part of a two-pronged employer survey which explored outward mobility and co-curricular activity and their links to graduate employability as perceived by surveyed employers.¹

This brief addresses the correlations between study abroad activities upon graduate employability by investigating the perceptions of graduate employers based in Scotland. The research was developed through a partnership between NUS Scotland and the Scottish Higher Education Employability Forum (SHEEF) in response to increasing awareness

of the importance of graduate employability.

The study surveyed a small but diverse range of graduate employers from across Scotland to gather information about employers' perceptions of the benefits of study abroad experience upon graduate employability with 45 respondents participating in the survey. A full list of participating employers can be found in the acknowledgements.

This report is intended to serve as:

- a preliminary snapshot of Scottish employers' perspectives on the potential benefits of study-abroad activity.
- a segway for future research and investigation into employers' recognition of the potential benefits of study abroad activity upon graduate employability.
- a stepping stone for HEIs and student support agencies to integrate employers' perspectives in the development of the relevance and articulation of study abroad activities upon graduate employability.

1. For more on graduates and employability, see Developing Scotland's Graduates For The Global Economy: From Here to Where? (NUS Scotland, 2012).



Survey Findings

The research findings offer a preliminary indication of employer perceptions of study abroad activity and the link to graduate employability. The research found that:

- almost two thirds (65%) of the employers surveyed stated that they thought studying abroad would improve an applicant's employment prospects – 7% stated it would definitely do so, 18% significantly so, and 40% stated it would to some extent.
- less than a third (29%) thought that study abroad experience would not improve graduates' chances of employment.
- in response to being asked if Scottish employers would recognise the benefits of transferable skills gained through a short-term study abroad experience, 50% of employers responded that they would, in varying degrees.
- only 1 out of the 45 valid responses mentioned language skills as a possible study abroad graduate attribute in the open responses.

Recommendations

- A much wider conversation should be had at a national level with Scottish employers, looking at exactly how industry could, and would like to, be involved. This should explore areas where industry, universities and colleges can ensure that the benefits to students - and to Scotland - are promoted.
- A need for greater articulation of study abroad experiences. This can only be done however by institutions – and graduates – taking responsibility for competently articulating these attributes, not least to ensure that these graduates are commensurately valued in the Scottish labour market to avoid potentially damaging brain drain.
- Further investigation into short-term study abroad periods in relation to employer recognition and perceived skill-sets attained.

Introductory Background

With graduate unemployment at incredibly worrying levels, it is clear that Scottish graduates will be competing in an incredibly tough jobs market. Recent figures released by the Centre for Economics and Business Research showed that 52% of last year's university-leavers were unemployed or under-employed six months after graduating.² A recent British Council/Think Global report stated that “global employability skills are emerging as one of the crucial determinants of business success and economic growth”.³ Consequently, the personal, academic and professional benefits for students who undertake study abroad opportunities take on an added, more urgent importance.

A recent survey of UK business leaders, conducted by the British Council and Think Global, found that 75% of board- and director-level executives and CEOs think that the UK is “in danger of being left behind by emerging countries unless young people learn to think more globally.”⁴ If one of the key benefits of producing global graduates is to maintain and improve Scottish competitiveness on the global stage, it is all the more important to determine the views of Scottish employers during the emergence of what has been termed the ‘economy of experience.’ This is defined as the process whereby ‘students and graduates aim to supplement their degree with a range of other qualifications, skills and attributes, which will give them the edge in applications for competitive graduate positions.’⁵

Research Methods

The study surveyed employers on their perspectives of the benefits, impact and relevance of outward student mobility upon graduate employability. The survey targeted a diverse range of graduate employers across Scotland in order to gauge their opinions, and determine the extent to which they value and recognise study abroad experience as part of a potential employee's

2. Degrees of Doubt: Is University Worth the Investment? (CEBR, 2011), p. 11.

3. The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy (British Council/Think Global, 2011), p. 4.

4. Ibid.

5. Originally coined by Brown and Hesketh (OUP, 2004). See Rachel Brooks and Johanna Waters, Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalisation of Higher Education (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 143-144.

profile. In total 46 organisations responded with 45 valid responses; a break down by size, sector, and industry is provided as an appendix to this report and a full list of the employer participants can be found in the acknowledgements.

Respondents were asked four closed questions relating to study abroad activity. Responses were sought via a Likert scale with five options presented, from 1 for ‘Don’t Know’ to 5 for ‘Definitely’. Additionally, there was an option at the end for two open responses around a number of common themes. Respondents were sought using an email invitation to complete an online survey with the range of organisations was primarily drawn from membership lists of CBI Scotland and the Federation of Small Businesses.

For these purposes, employers were given a definition of study abroad as a period spent in Europe, undertaking studies, which would receive equal academic credit to having stayed in the home country.

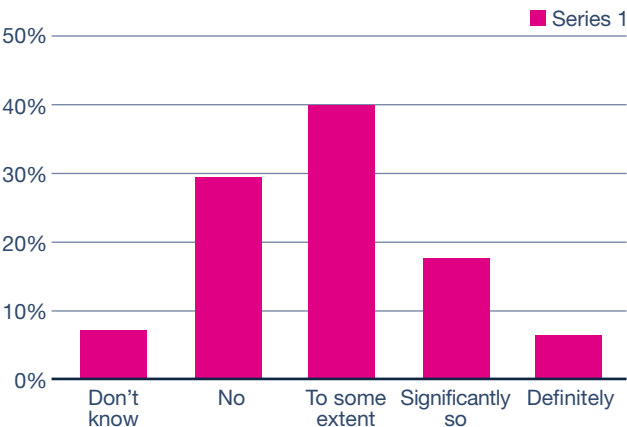
Survey results

Employers’ views on the benefits and relevance of study abroad experiences to employment

1.1 Multiple Choice Questions

Question 1

In your experience, do you feel that graduate applicants who have study abroad experience have a better chance of employment?

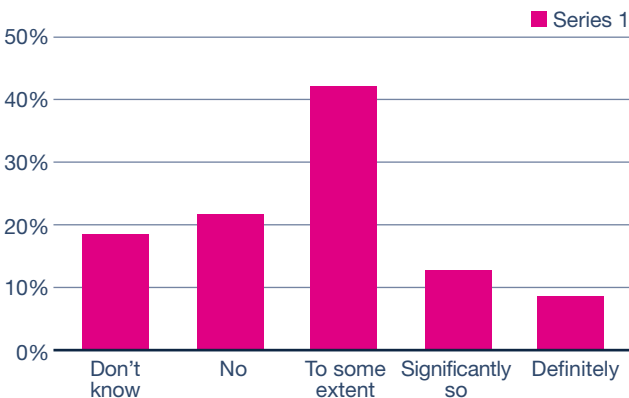


Almost two thirds (65%) of the employers we surveyed stated that they thought studying abroad would improve an applicant’s employment prospects – 7% stated it would definitely do so, 18% significantly so, and 40% stated it would to some extent. Less than one third (29%) of our respondents stated that they thought studying abroad would not improve a graduate’s employment chances.

Interestingly, even this level of no response runs counter to the findings of the most recent UK-wide employer surveys and the comments of all surveyed Scottish-based students and institutional staff. This could raise questions about the extent of internationalised strategies on the part of Scottish companies and the degree to which study abroad attributes are articulated by graduates and understood by potential Scottish employers.

Question 2

In Scotland the most popular study abroad programme is Erasmus which is between 3 -12 months in duration. Given that student uptake of this currently stands at only 1% of the Scottish student population, would you be supportive of shorter term, intensive study abroad periods of 2-4 weeks when recruiting graduates?



Employers were overwhelmingly supportive of shorter study abroad windows, with 58% of respondents supporting such moves, stating that they would definitely (9%), significantly so (7%) or to some extent (42%) support such moves. Less than a quarter (24%) would not be supportive with 18% responding that they didn’t know.

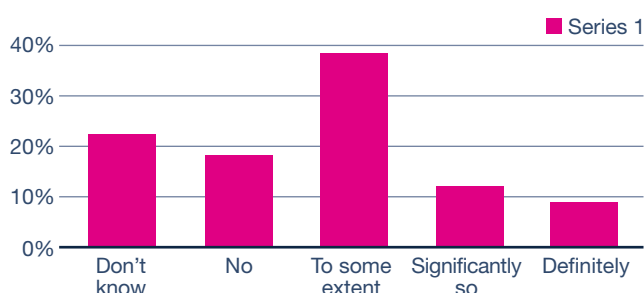


From the above we can gather that, on the whole, Scottish employers would appear to be at best ambivalent towards shorter mobility periods with the majority saying only to some extent, and the no option gathering more responses than the combined significantly so and definitely responses.

This was replicated in responses to the second open question dealing with future company vision, with one respondent stating that what was key was demonstrating “get up and go”. The worry could be that employers may feel that, with shorter mobility periods, this may be lacking to some extent, and that it represents an easier choice. However, for many students, this choice is often far more accessible for them, particularly for those with dependents, disabilities and part-time jobs.

Question 3

If a potential graduate employee had a study abroad experience of 2-4 weeks, would you recognise the benefits of transferable skills gained during this period?

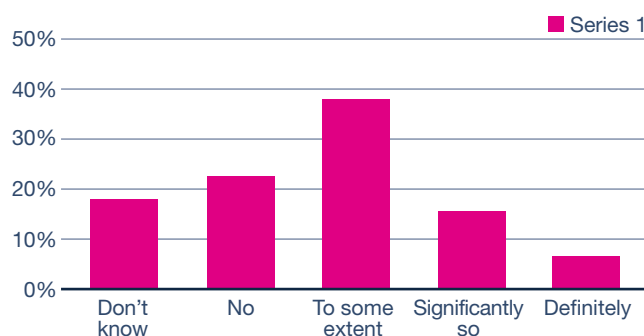


We can see from this table that, on the whole, employers would recognise, even if only to some extent, the benefits that shorter mobility could bring. Whilst 18% of respondents said no, the combined significantly so and definitely response was 22%, which goes along with a 38% to some extent response.

The 22% that indicated don't know implies that a deeper understanding of study abroad attributes is needed, perhaps in conjunction with a greater articulation of these relayed to employers in the recruitment process.

Question 4

Do you feel that graduate employees with study abroad experience enhance your company's global competitiveness?



As above in Question 1, the employers we surveyed seem to be fairly torn over this issue. The combined significantly so and definitely response was 23% - just 1% point higher than the no response. However, the “to some extent” response was 38%, meaning over 60% of respondents were positive about this possibility.

1.2 Open Ended Responses

The open responses raised interesting questions about the value placed on mobility periods and show the diversity of opinion on their value.

“In my experience, those with foreign study experience do not have any advantage over those who do not. Co-curricular activity is far more important. Through this I have found students who have gained a commercial awareness, improved team working, motivation and self-confidence.”

Others valued mobility but not necessarily those of shorter periods:

“...the thing that differentiates graduates is the fact that some of them have the skills, the motivation, and the application to seek out and obtain experiences such as Erasmus...simply sheep dipping every student into a 1 – 4 week placement won't change that in the slightest.”



The increase in cultural awareness was cited frequently and several others responded that these graduates had:

“a better sense of where they fit in to the world, confidence organisation, team work, working with other types of people.”

“increase[d] interpersonal skills including ability to see issues from a range of perspectives including cultural sensitivities.”

“broader outlook and attitude. Possibly better able to work independently and deal with challenges.”

“Greater vision, independence, experience.”

In the open responses, several mobility champions were identified:

“Given that we participate in a number of schemes whereby we are providing international experience to graduates coming from abroad, we know first-hand the difference it can make to the employment prospects of the graduates involved. To some extent it is all about demonstrating that you have the ‘get up and go’ that employers are looking for...”

“We are constantly pushing for students to have increased international study experience. We consider this important for the growth of the Scottish economy and feel Scottish business could benefit from improved international connections along with the host of added skills students gain abroad.”

These are extremely strong responses, and ones that we would no doubt intuitively expect to be more commonly found in the comments but were not. This is also played out above in the statistical findings. As we saw previously, one reason for this could be that employers simply view study abroad as enhancing personal attributes, and do not see the link with employability.

One respondent stated that “as an international business mobility could be an advantage, depending on the position applied for”. This is possibly indicative of a wider-held view that some Scottish companies do not see the holistic benefit to someone with international experience and consequent greater inter-cultural awareness.

Conclusions

The results present an interesting challenge to all in the sector. Employers are generally supportive of international mobility, including shorter mobility windows, and can see the benefits to their business of having employees with experience of studying abroad. Among those surveyed, there are evidently several Scottish employers who are ‘mobility champions’ in key industries. However, there is a significant minority who are less enthusiastic. The findings therefore present a number of opportunities for all stakeholders to work more closely in highlighting the role of study abroad experience in the future competitiveness of Scottish industry. This can only be done however by institutions – and graduates – taking

responsibility for competently articulating these attributes, not least to ensure that these graduates are commensurately valued in the Scottish labour market to avoid unnecessary brain drain.

Undoubtedly, this is an area which merits further attention within a Scottish specific setting. As outlined in the following recommendations, it would be of great benefit to undertake much wider qualitative and quantitative research, looking at exactly how industry could, and would like to, be involved. This should explore areas where industry and universities can ensure that the benefits to students - and Scotland - are promoted.

References

Developing Scotland's Graduates For The Global Economy: From Here to Where? (NUS Scotland, 2012)

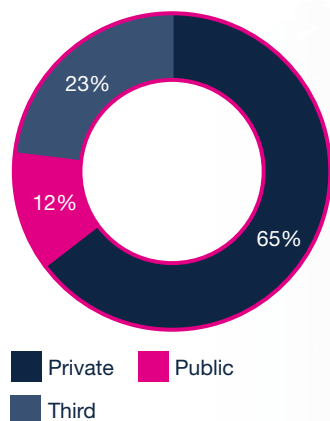
Degrees of Doubt: Is University Worth the Investment? (CEBR, 2011)

The Global Skills Gap: Preparing Young People for the New Global Economy (British Council/ Think Global, 2011)

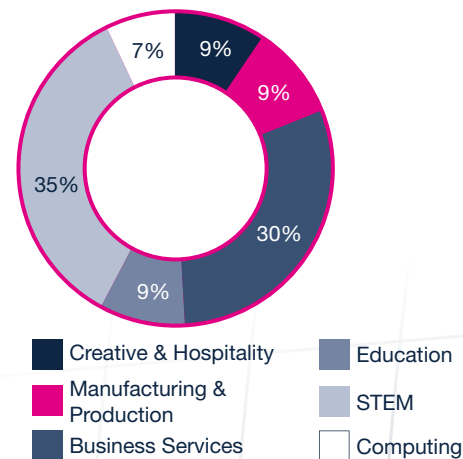
Student Mobilities, Migration and the Internationalisation of Higher Education (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Appendix: Breakdown of Employers

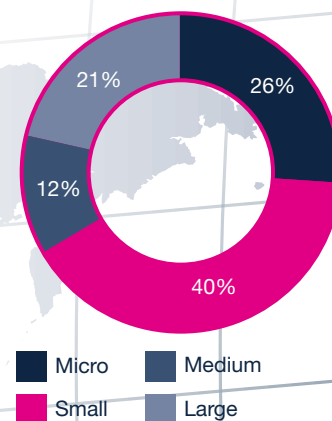
i. Breakdown of respondents by sector



ii. Breakdown of respondents by industry



iii. Breakdown of respondents by size⁶



6. For these purposes we have used EU definitions, wherein: Micro = up to 10 employees; Small = up to 50; Medium = up to 250; and large = over 250.

Acknowledgements

Employer Participants

NUS Scotland and SHEEF would like to thank the following companies, employers and individual members of staff who took part in this survey:

4c Design Limited

AvantiCell Science Ltd

Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry

Balmoral Group

BBC Scotland

Business Gateway (Highland & Moray)

Cisco

Controlled Therapeutics (Scotland) Ltd

Covert Group Security & Cleaning

Cultural Enterprise Office

Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce

Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce

Edinburgh International Science Festival

Flexitricity

Forth Dimension Displays

Future Balance

HR Consultancy

Hydro Group plc

IBM

International Fish Cannery (Scotland) Ltd

Inverness Chamber of Commerce

LOGICALWARE

LUX Assure

New Park Management Ltd.

Precision Photometrics Ltd

Reactec

Redpath Construction Ltd

Renishaw plc

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

ScienceDirect

Scottish Chambers of Commerce

Scottish Enterprise

Shanks Ltd

sparqs

Stafffinders

STEMNET

Taylor Mckenzie Research & Marketing Ltd

TBDA (Scotland) Ltd

The Lovat

Totseat Ltd

URS Scott Wilson

Wideblue